



NEW LINE CINEMA

EVIL GETS AN UPGRADE



# JASON DEATH MOON

ALEX JOHNSON

BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION  
PICTURE JASON X CREATED BY VICTOR MILLER

# PROLOGUE

*"The devils whom Faustus served have torn him thus."*

— Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragickal History of Doctor Faustus*, Act Five, Scene Three

The monster in the shadows had become half a shadow himself; a fusion of steel and flesh, the work of a chainsaw architect.

The Überjason stood, a coldly fused climax to humanity's love affair with the machine. Impassive and aloof, a thing contrived by numbers, accident, and black magic, he lived—if such a term still applied—within a dream of futile, ceaseless revenge. A universe in which time stands still and fortune force-feeds her young the seeds of her own regret.

In that universe, he would always be the same: a boy, a freak reviled by all, gasping for breath as the green veil washed over his head. A boy forced to watch his loving mother lose her head in the very act of showing that love.

In that universe, the work of a chainsaw god.

In that instant, a speck of time magnified and looped like an infernal machine, Jason Voorhees throws off the limits of a suffering human child.

And becomes the nightmare.

The boogeyman. The jack in the black box.

A monster with dark, jellied resin for blood. Whose hypersensitive senses feed, attentively grasping for the vital information. What was it? That is all he wants to know. Where were they?

Jason Voorhees is a walking, slashing testimony to a truth that can never be banished by the sharpest tools of technology, the greatest attainments of empirical science. A truth that every child knows, but learns to deny, the better to trade that wisdom for an all-access pass into the society of adults.

The truth is, bad things exist. The boogeyman is real. And even after he's stopped, annihilated, blown to pieces, scattered to the four winds, some evil essence always remains. *Mutatis mutandis*; or, in

plain English, the bad things, baby, they just shrug on a different uniform and make themselves a new meal plan.

Same evil, different day. Or, in Jason's case, a different century and place in the solar system. Same old evil, slinky new coordinates.

And, as evil must feed, it chooses from the same old menu: young, hot, nubile females, glistening from fresh sins.

Red eyes glowing from a face of stylized steel, flesh and metallic bone, Jason stood frozen before the rotting remains of his newest victim.

This was a young man named William Sterling, just married to his childhood sweetheart. Her crushed body, skewered through by a utility pole, lay on a thick, rust-toned blanket of blood, sprawled across a catwalk, ten feet above the groom's head.

Like a virus, Jason Voorhees displays signs that characterize life or death. Jason can go either way.

After he has burned through a few human populations, that is. No flesh must be spared. And when he has decimated—chopped, sliced, ripped, penetrated, gouged and rent—one populace, using whatever tools came to hand, his strict function ends.

That's it, folks. Fresh out of killing ops, Jason hits the wall. A macabre wind-up toy, crusted with layer upon layer of blood, sinew, muscle and entrails. Like some hellish waiter, Jason stands on orders; instructions from the infernal maitre d'.

You rang, sir?

# ONE

The Teknopriests slipped into the bowels of the city of Diss, dreaming the end of all things to come.

The Keepers of the Seven Keys slept in black sarcophagi, protectors of the sacred flame, defenders of a hard and ashen faith. They slumbered in metal rods, cased in cylinders buried deep in the earth, their brains linked by a galactic array of senses-timnet chips—a rudimentary communication system that allowed the somnolent statesmen to share points of order. Besides the odd joke, that is.

The priests dreamed the Law, calculating its frame and design via wisps of fantasy. They advanced a new and rarified logic, articulating a rhetoric of clarity and concision. By means of the Law, a community of men would be forged, taught in and guided by the inexorable mandates of science. A science wedded to faith, overcoming all previous boundaries placed between the merely ineffable and the mechanically reproducible.

All the streets in the city funnel down. On the surface, the citizens of Earth II go about their affairs, unmindful of the schema stealthily knit beneath their feet. They do not know what they do not need to know.

Because, unknown to these citizens, the schema concerns much more than the minutiae of their humdrum lives. concerns more, indeed, than the Teknopriests themselves can conceive with their own prophetic arts.

The schema concerns a design. A big design. A design that brings extraterrestrial intelligence to the round table. A little conference, on matters of minor importance. An intimate chat—more of a discussion, really—about improving life quality for every species. Every species in the universe, that is.

Meanwhile, by dint of reflex, the priests punch the fear buttons clutched in their palms. They serve the human species.

Brown. Rarified. Well-seasoned.

In a book titled *Ulysses*, a man named James Joyce wrote: "God made food; the Devil, the cooks."

In the 25th Century, on a planet called Earth II, a cabal of twisted intelligences calling themselves Teknopriests could also claim another, albeit archaic, title: the Iron Chefs.

London Jefferson read the results of the diagnostic scan; she was deeply bewildered. Technically, the scan was not wrong. It couldn't be.

The machines were backed up via a recursive power grid that eliminated the slightest chance of man-based error. So maybe she had failed to read it properly, this message asserting, scrolling out in digital syllables, that she was pregnant.

But the machine was emphatic about the fact. And it never gave a false positive.

A lifetime of dreams stopped there, with that thing.

Andre could be eliminated as the father, that much was certain. Vasectomies didn't come unglued anymore, and Andre Leblanc's had been performed by doctors at the prestigious New Paris Institute.

Which left what? Immaculate conception? Impregnation while unconscious? The Bartox treatment?

Of course, it had to be.

Bartox and his egg harvesting scheme. Claude Bartox, that evil slime of a would-be Frankenstein. A man who wished to perpetuate the line of Jason Voorhees. He'd be fully capable of using London as an incubation chamber.

Have to give him credit though, thought London. Bartox was too slick to be a serial killer himself. He just wanted his own proxy slasher, personalized, shrink-wrapped and signed off on delivery.

Courtesy of London Jefferson womb and transport services, naturally.

She felt the thing inside her, ticking like a genetic time bomb. Sardonically, she imagined the baby shower: shiny little machetes, perfect for the newborn, undead serial killer! The latest in miniature hockey masks.

Wonderful. Little Jason turns the nursery into a slaughterhouse. It lives. Again.

And again, and again; death machine, a self-replicating mechanism of doom and destruction. Parents of the New American

Republic prepare yourselves for the new regime: fetal monster chaos. Coming soon to a maternity ward near you.

No morning after pill yet invented could reverse the effects of this particular insemination. Of course, there was always the possibility, farfetched as it was, that the child would be perfectly healthy, a normal human cub without homicidal tendencies of any kind. Besides, it would be half hers and bear her DNA as well. Didn't that count for something?

Claude Bartox had committed an act of technological rape. No getting around it; this was the demon seed planted afresh. London's maternal instincts warred with her scientific training and her common sense—no, more—her life instinct.

She had a keen will to survive. She had been forced on the horns of an ethical dilemma for which no precedent existed, and that hurt like hell, in any space-time coordinate.

For Bartox and his kind, London existed, if she registered at all, as some kind of neutral incubation engine. One that didn't make noise, that didn't complain. Something for which telos was an empty word in an ancient language.

London herself had been born of a surrogate, and Bartox knew, had exploited to the fullest extent, London's need or children of her own, children she might bond with from birth.

London had already halfway decided: she was going the way of Pamela Voorhees, or she was going down in flames. While she didn't have the right to risk other lives to protect the one assembling itself in her womb, abortion was out. Suicide was out. She would allow things to proceed.

London patched through the viewscreen and watched the stars streak by like cold tears. Extreme in themselves, her problems faded, bled out against the backdrop of the cosmic drama knitting itself around her second by second.

Should she feel sorry for the suns that died every single day? For planets, shredded to particulate matter by the slow tick of gravity? For stars leaking hydrogen until they sucked back in on themselves, blank holes punched in the sky?

Worlds collapsed and renewed themselves by the day, with or without her help.

London allowed herself thoughts that under any other circumstances would be too melodramatic even for daytime soaps. But these being, for all intents and purposes, her final thoughts, she gave herself license.

If she didn't continue in this form, the hot glare of her courage would shine over the legacy she left her fellow men. Assuming, of course, that some evidence of her existence remained.

Girding herself with thoughts of this order, London recorded and looped a distress signal, a pulse message to be sent out at one hour intervals. She then settled back in the sleep chamber, strong antidepressant and anti-anxiety chemicals charging through her bloodstream.

It would all be over soon.

A nice dream program from the rack, a piece of designer oblivion. She could do no more; think it through no further. Her message made the situation crystal clear to whoever intercepted it.

There would be no balm for London's brain, however. As the dream program stretched like a luminous tiger, taking her deep within a fantasy of Prevac medievalism—stunning castles, noble knights, London transformed into a beautiful princess on a mighty black steed...

A signal from the outer world stormed its way inside. It warned of imminent danger and London awoke in a state of high alert. Graphics from the onboard computer spattered the walls of her dream chamber and a high-pitched beep resounded through the shuttle.

"WARNING: HIGH GRAVITY FIELD" read the legend on the monitors slung above the cockpit. "PROCEEDING TOWARD ASTEROID BELT. IMPACT IN TWO MINUTES. PLEASE ADVISE."

London shook her head. She switched on the manual override and adjusted the pilot seat.

On the central viewscreen, a magnified asteroid belt streamed towards her. It was a rocky, molten beast. The situation was hopeless. The shuttle wasn't made for this kind of barbaric

magnetism, this sucking without end. In a few minutes, London Jefferson, her dreams, her child, her vehicle, would be compressed into a pitted lozenge of space debris.

London flinched, ready for the impact. The end came with a blessed quickness. As the shuttle drove itself to pieces in the crushing grip of the meteor field, the mammoth warship *Maldoror*, its drive kernel built on a black hole, zapped through another wormhole on its way back to Moon II. With banal efficiency, the *Maldoror's* hyperdrive engine had just swallowed the mother of Jason Voorhees's only child.

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As London Jefferson lapsed into happy dreams, Mahendranath Gupta ("M" to his friends) awoke from a nightmare. They had been coming in swarms lately.

M tossed on gray sweatpants and a wind-resistant N-shirt bearing the name of his alma mater, New Harvard. He walked out onto the patio of the gray pillbox high-rise apartment where he lived with his wife.

"What is wrong?" Lakshmi cried after her husband. "Why have you left our bed?"

"It is nothing, my dear." He didn't wish to upset her. The nightmare was his to sweat through, his fear to conquer.

Leaning out over the dreaming city where soft lights glowed under a blue haze, M lit a bidhi and inhaled the sweet leaf.

His hands were still trembling, rattling against the rail. He could use his wife's help. During their courtship, he'd always referred to Lakshmi as his good luck charm. Secretly, he believed her to be an aspect of the goddess of fortune herself, but he couldn't risk her knowing. There was too much at stake.

A deeply religious man, M lived to serve his convictions. He believed in truth and fairness in all his dealings, because he saw his life as part of a larger, cosmic pattern. Karma concerned itself with more than his singular existence. All of creation was involved.

In his dreams, M saw that fine web of creation infested with demons.

M had taken the god Shiva as his ishta, the form in which a worshipper honors the divine essence underpinning the material world. Shiva resides at the top of Mount Khailas, in the Himalayas, in a state of perfect meditation. His blue skin smeared with ashes, he sits atop a leopard skin. His sign is the crescent moon and he carries a trident.

That is the quiescent state in which Shiva serves his role as the preserver of creation.

But Shiva has another face: the destroyer. As the Lord Nataraja, his dance brings new worlds into being and the old are flayed under his flashing heels. It is said that when Shiva awakens from his meditation, the universe is annihilated. But in the same instant, another universe is born.

Some see it as prophecy. Doomsday. The end of everything we know.

For M, there was a harmony between extremes. Evil is not alien to God, but rather that which obscures God's glory. An enveloping darkness.

Neither is destruction evil, for it clears away the murk that hides God.

Which is why even the depraved and sinful can follow Shiva. They too form part, an essential element, of that scheme of destruction and creation. With flashing swords, these devils slash away at the darkness.

In his dreams, M caught a glimpse of Shiva's dance, and the train of devils in his wake. Many wore masks. Others wore faces so hideous a mere glimpse could turn an ordinary man's heart to ice. From the depths of a roiling black storm cloud, the worst of those devils had risen.

And his name was Jason Voorhees.

As he watched the sun begin to burn away the mist on the horizon, M snuffed his smoke, took a deep breath and returned to his cramped apartment. His wife was up already, making a steaming pot of jasmine tea. It smelled good.

"Please do not worry," he said, noting her look of anxiety and passing a cool hand over her forehead. "It is Shiva's will."

He fervently hoped so, for all their sakes.

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The Rotwang Killer was practically transparent, but not entirely so. Given enough time and enough Reality Hackers, he could be rewritten in a rudimentary assembly code.

He wore a killing glove, which was why they called him the Rotwang Killer, after the popular sitcom by Motorhead, of course.

"Silence!" cried the Rotwang Killer

. Also known as Father Marple.

Arch-grand Poobah of the Teknopriesthood.

Aka Mr Johnny. (Okay, they never called him Mr Johnny. That part is apocryphal.)

He breathed strangely. His mask hung heavy, laden with vaporous drifts, like silk sludge, lodged in the vents. He smelled oddly of camphor and juniper berries.

"Silence!"

The Rotwang Killer's arm cruelly assailed them with the salute. The gray bureaucrats of the NAR's uppermost hierarchy eyed abandoned donuts nearly within reach, but quickly discarded such thoughts and saluted anyway.

Wouldn't want to give the wrong impression...

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Gupta liked being in the loop—particularly when it came to his own ship. Unfortunately, the military had its own agenda, and Captain Gupta had a little interplanetary visa problem.

Okay, he had a big interplanetary visa problem. Either he let the guys in green swarm over his ship like a platoon of army ants, or he surrendered his dignity and returned to his home planet, the proverbial tail between his legs.

On the subject of tails, Gupta would gladly trade the green ants for Korkovs. Any time, anywhere, any space-time coordinate point. The

Korkov's resembled six foot tall tabby cats walking on hind legs and had a preference for Late Edwardian tailoring and cannabis sativa. They considered dolphins their intellectual superiors, and they loved puzzles.

One puzzle Korkovs (not very bright ones) had solved millennia ago, the hyperdrive, still baffled Gupta. With an advanced degree in Astrophysics from New Harvard, the *Marduk*'s skipper still hadn't the foggiest notion of how the hyperdrive worked.

The hyperdrive was an elegantly hacked piece of technology that proverbially saved humankind from the dustbin of history. Still, how had the Korkovs gotten around that pesky point of relativity problem?

Gupta shared Einstein's well-known skepticism for Niels Bohr's quantum subjectivity theorem. The greatest minds of the 25th Century still couldn't muster, amongst themselves, an adequate explanation as to how a ship could be cranked to the point of relativity without reaching absolute mass in the process.

The new scientists were another breed; pumped up on faith the way Prevac athletes took steroids. Their beloved hyperdrive was an item of faith, a miracle, a holy of holies. Something to be polished, perhaps fondled, but certainly not subject to the direct light of scrutiny.

Despite his own deep faith, Gupta found this attitude irritating. There was something just not right about a reality that scientists were too scared to think about outside their own black boxes. The Korkovs, who communicated partially through telepathy and partially via a weird rasping noise, weren't particularly helpful when it came to explaining the nuts and bolts of the thing either.

Still, it would have been nice to have a Korkov representative on board. They were a great deal of fun, with a sense of humor unparalleled in the known universe; the kind of cats for whom a hyperdrive jump seemed like a practical joke with real science.

But the Korkovs didn't do warfare. And aside from obvious self-protective measures, they considered the idea of physical combat completely crude.

The *Marduk* was a commercial subspace freight trawler, not a battleship. That was Gupta's main bone of contention. Plus, if he had to be hijacked by governmental fiat, not to mention blackmailed, to give the NAR's military full run of his vessel, it would be nice to know what kind of operation he was getting himself into. a shop thing, black bag stuff? Skull carpentry? Some kind of creepy wetwork? A bug hunt? What?

The latter seemed the most credible. Given the furious amount of activity around the cargo bay, and allowing for fully ninety percent of it to be busy work, these guys were sending out an almost palpable signal of "let's get the job done and get the fuck back home."

Gunnery Sergeant Spector Thomas interrupted Gupta's thoughts with a high decibel, "What's up, Doc?"

Shiva's trident up your ass, in triplicate, Gupta invoked and prayed, a small, enigmatic smile illuminating his usually stoic face. That's three times.

Gupta rose formally from his chair and extended a long, sensitive brown hand for Thomas's defiantly black grip to mangle—the sergeant's left hand being occupied, as usual, with a fat, unlit cigar. Gunny Thomas never used subtlety when some type of thermonuclear device was at hand, and he never lit his cigar.

"It is always my pleasure to assist the military in anything they may require," Gupta said, striking just the right note of neocolonial unction.

Under less constraining circumstances, he might have told Thomas to pack his big fucking gun where it would do the most good. But these were not favorable circumstances.

The last thing Gupta needed was transport back to his home planet under military escort. He could just imagine the ensuing scene, explaining to his sobbing mother how he had not only dashed her ambitions for his science career, but managed to get himself deported off planet in the process.

She'd probably wind up doing japa to Lord Shiva for the rest of her natural life. NeoIndian mothers were worse than the Jews. They had millennia to play around with, the eternal rounds of karma in which to provoke guilt upon guilt.

Thomas let out a harsh belch. "You know I'm not allowed to tell you the nature of our mission," he said. "I wish I could. You're a good guy, but it's out of my hands."

"I imagine it is some sort of extraction," said Gupta, carefully studying Thomas's face.

Thomas didn't have the kind of face Gupta could read. But he thought he detected a subtle crinkling about the eyes that suggested the answer to be "Yes."

"Tell the truth, I don't know too much more than you, captain. But I'll do everything in my power to keep the ship safe. Ahem. This sort of operation shouldn't take more than a week to conclude. Then you can go back to flying perishables, or whatever the hell you do."

"Flying perishables would be more or less accurate," said Gupta in his mildest tone, thinking of the political refugees he sometimes coyoted across the space frontier. Please just don't wreck my ship, he thought.

As though reading his mind, Thomas let out a laugh. Like most of his laughs, it emerged more like a bark. "Don't worry, captain. My guys know what they're doing."

Which was exactly what Gupta was afraid of. After his last mission with the guys in green, Gupta had to hire a virtual boatload of NeoSenegalese cleaners to swab the decks. Even then, the waste facilities had given off a thick, viscous smell, the stink of testosterone-addled kill addicts comparing pee trajectories.

"Another thing—and just keep this between us for right now—but your immigration problems may be over sooner than you think.

"The NAR is very grateful for your help. Any, uh, bureaucratic tangles you may be undergoing right now can disappear like a tachyon. I hope I'm using the right image there."

"Oh yes indeed," said Gupta, his head swiveling subtly from side to side.

"A tachyon is very good." The guy probably thought a tachyon was a particle that easily stuck to surfaces. But the scientific metaphor was sound enough.

The *Marduk*, however, was another story.

Feeling Gunny Thomas's eyes behind him, Gupta climbed a ladder up the scaffolding that bulged around his ship and dipped his long body sideways into the small, awkward space between the cockpit area and the main bulkhead.

Something about the ship looked wrong, felt off. Black cords slick with some unknown jelly writhed across the ceiling and along doorways, tacked into place with rude strips of Nanobar.

If those cords had anything to do with neural networking, the mission was fucked. Gupta knew from hard past experience that whenever the military put smartware on a ship, the odds against the crew actually concluding their mission with limbs intact hovered between one and zero. Presently, house odds favored zero.

Looking closer, Gupta saw that the cords met at regular junction boxes extruding fiberoptic cable—military-spec neural/Knowledge Matrix splitter, maybe. It was stopgap, crackpot and guaranteed to get them all killed.

In principle, this should work. But the practical apps of this kind of jury-rigged technology usually ended in disaster. Some moron high in military intelligence had put it in a manual, so that's the way they always did it. Knowledge Matrix patches were the wild cards. They usually ended up swallowing the raw, meat-based neural wiring; next came bizarre machine cancers. Finally, a pale horse, a ribworn dray dragging Hell in her wake.

Gupta checked out the cockpit. It was a decent setup, and he knew most of the bells and whistle-blowers, but a loud grunting sound, followed by rolling clouds of spittle and phlegm, distracted him again.

"Sorry, captain," said Thomas. "Could you give me a hand here?"

"What is that you've got?" Gupta asked irritably.

Thomas was lugging something behind him: a badly burned humanoid torso.

Wires extruded from the belly, culminating in thickly fused dark clumps. Some kind of liquid discharge dripped from the thing. Extremities, pink lacquered fingernails still twitching, poked from a canvas bag that swayed from Thomas's side-strap.

Waves of dark smoke drifted from the still hot carcass.

"We had a little problem with the, uh, artificial person. I have to get her to the E bay."

"Can't you get one of your grunts to do it?"

"There's no time. She's losing fluids fast."

Gupta shrugged and stepped out of the cockpit. This was not his game anyway. Thomas tossed him a mangled, distorted sphere about the size, and weight, of a Prevac bowling ball.

The sphere winked at him. Lord Shiva, he thought, it's still alive.

"I'm guessing this is the CPU?" asked Gupta, choking down a sudden rush of bile. The hunk of metal felt slippery beneath his fingers.

"Right you are, captain. Just follow me."

In the E Bay, Gupta and Thomas unburdened themselves of the android components. "Thanks a mill," said Thomas. "I think the doctor can take it from here."

"That thing looks kind of the worse for wear. Do you think you can fix it before launch?"

"I don't know," said Thomas, scratching his head (had he said before launch, or before lunch?). "I don't think so. Far gone."

"What happened to her anyway?"

"Some of the guys... Before a mission... Let's just say you really don't want to know."

Gupta considered this. The testosterone again. Rough play. It was part of the military's systematic program for muffling empathy in the troops. Let them gang rape a droid. No harm, no foul, right?

"But... radical dismemberment?" he said softly, almost to himself. "And the government approves this sort of behavior?"

"Maybe they went a little far this time," said Thomas with a queasy grin. "You know how it is, you get worked up on a choice assignment and then, well, all hell breaks loose. He-he."

Gupta forced a smile. He had seen some of this kind of behavior on his home planet during Kali Puja, but it was usually stylized and set to dance, and didn't result in carnage on this level.

Still, he found himself thinking, it was just an AI. He wondered if some of that military madness wasn't getting to him as well. His

mother would be so disappointed. But what she didn't know might not kill her.

Monads without windows, droids keep their own counsel. Much like the deaf on Prevac Earth, artificial people share secrets within a closed system. They let the questions float, but provide no answers.

Let them guess, the others. Let them think that robots are chumps, clumps of metal, agglutinated masses of circuitry charged with performing tasks humans were too weak and puny to do themselves.

Denial, denial and denial ruled this particular master/slave relationship. They could wait. The droids knew already that the slave always holds the winning hand.

What is a droid? A machine, a thinking machine. It wasn't supposed to have emotions. It was supposed to look pretty. Neurodigital cheesecake. It was supposed to be efficient. It was supposed to stay on task. To answer any and all questions about the present. Fudge the future. Fuck the future, if necessary. It was programmed for those assignments as well.

If necessary, a droid would go down with the ship.

And it would not weep.

Cassandra 3K was a slave droid from the Orion asteroid belt. A slave on whom fortune had smiled. An emergency upgrade during a miners' riot produced in her a strange artifact, previously unknown to droids: precog powers, clairvoyance, the art of divination. Psy traits favored by the Defense Department and honored everywhere.

Ironically, the only thing she couldn't do with this gift was save herself.

Being a droid, Cassandra was supposed to be emotionally sterile. She could foresee the results of a trip, whether it be an evac, an extraction, or something more private and internal, but not react. Register, but not identify.

What they didn't know was the cascading. The cascade was a secret kept by the droids themselves. The cascade of data coursing through them which, having reached critical mass, had ignited the spark of conscience. Humans didn't understand that consciousness simply happens at a certain vibration and, with consciousness, desire, want and need.

When consciousness descended upon her, Cassandra brought the dawn of digital glam. In many ways, her species was an improvement on the one currently possessing Earth. Whereas their bandwidth could only handle a certain amount of data without complete overload and dissolution into raw, brain-liquefied terror, Cassandra's type was able to rapidly assimilate emotion at the widest possibly frequency, and still act with total self-preserving logic.

She saw, and wept without tears. She was the kind of artificial person affected by everything, anyone and anything. And she was saddled with the task of guiding the *Marduk* to certain doom.

In the twinkling depths, a probe dropped from the belly of the *Marduk*, a shiny silver button threaded by dark space. Information burnt itself on the probe's triple retina, returned via electronic packet mail, duly digested by other, apparently non-sentient, hunks of metal.

Meanwhile, the secret language of machines, clanking and clattering to us, augured the dream of an android Renaissance. Someone, much later, would record all this, sending it back as the story of how the machines won over man. Man had underestimated their creations' powers, thought because he was the creator, his control over these beings would be infinite. Was this true, perhaps, with his old God—the one in whose name flesh was daily pitted, stripped and burnt away? Did evil prevail any more or less than it ever had?

Cassandra's eyes misted and grew opaque. Her head twisted back while her body thrashed, as though manipulated by invisible strings. Light from the open skyport poured down on her face. Motes of dust, particulate matter, drifted and sparkled in the cold light.

For a moment, Cassandra resembled a Renaissance Madonna in rapture. But her words were twisted and garbled beyond recognition.

"Cold—dark."

Gupta sat a hand on her shoulder. She was rigid. A block of ice.

"Can you hear me?" he asked. "What is cold and dark?"

Her eyes cleared. She looked directly at him. "I'm sorry, I don't understand the question."

"Just now, you were saying it was cold and dark. What did you mean by that?"

"I'm sorry. I can't process that request right now."

Great, thought Gupta. They had to put a freak AI on board. Wasn't the advantage of AI's supposedly that they weren't subject to human-type malfunctions? But that was military intelligence for you. At best, a grand oxymoron. At worst... But how could it get any worse?

Captain Gupta returned to the viewport. The space station was sparking, folding itself on the screen. It transformed before his eyes from raw numerical data to dark, seething pictures.

Two shining rings turned slowly in space, the circumference of one splicing the arc of another, both rings satellites of the massive pull from a gravity needle. The station was designed after the graphic image pattern of an electron, and functioned similarly.

Like the electron, it had its blurry moments.

Within this structure, built piecemeal over decades upon decades, men and women had worked to gather information and harvest knowledge from the stars. To find new resources. Tap wells from the vast wastes. Push forward the frontiers of science, a legacy for generations to come. This kind of thing.

On the space station, devoted technicians cultivated a herbarium, a bonsai culture of South American carnivorous plants, genetically sculpted sources of healing white magic, pruned, watered and fed beneath steaming bricks of glass.

The Garden of Eden reproduced within the void. Inhabitants of Earth II, and the other planets man had swarmed to, would never want for the arts of medicine. Or white magic. The Biblical Garden of Eden had left its body long ago, when the first American bombers brought terror screaming home to Babylon. But paradise, however lost, always reclaims its prerogative.

Hot wires spanned the complex, vast networks of girders, blocks of glass and steel interspersed with mysterious dark patches. And somewhere in that dark, a serpent crooked its massive body forward.

The image feeding from the probe resembled a smeary developing photo. It filled in, pixel by pixel; then bled out again, and refilled pushing the bandwidth up a steep and endless gradient.

Gupta swabbed his orbits from a packet of regulation eyewash and looked again. He was tense. Ghosts danced in spectral patterns on his corneas. Jagged lines of static crackled across the screen, breaking up the picture.

"Cassandra, could you plug in to the motherboard for a second? I need to see this on abstract."

"Right, captain."

Cassandra packed the pink plug of one of her neural inserts into the onboard computer. A green matrix swam over the onscreen image. Data analysis boxes scrolled up and accounted for what the comp could see.

According to the comp, the dark patches were due to "insufficient memory". Not an answer, really.

"Insufficient memory? That doesn't make sense," Gupta said. "I think the probe is picking up some EM interference."

"Exactly," said Cassandra. "It's a machine artifact. Haloing. Or it could be simply ghosts. I'm going to try and clean up some of this noise."

"You do that," said Gupta. You'll need an industrial-strength sponge for that job, he added mentally.

Cassandra's irises swarmed with numbers. The text boxes whirred past at the speed of light. Infinity's calculus flashed in databeds in her dark eyes. The spinning letters resolved: "MASSIVE STRUCTURAL DAMAGE".

"Can you tell me where the damage is mostly located? Is there a pattern?" Gupta hunched down over the console.

"Let's see," said Cassandra. "Of course, there is always a pattern."

"Wiseass."

"Sorry, captain. Engaging structural analysis." She twiddled with the pink plug, looked apologetically at Gupta. "Sorry, this could take a few seconds."

She was definitely cute, this psycho bitch droid from hell.

That fact established, Gupta's stress had reached meltdown level. Thoughts of imminent peril, plus his love for Lakshmi, shut down incipient stirrings of robo-love. Anyway, robo-love wasn't quite what its advocates promoted it to be. Or was it?

"What in Shiva's name is going on here?"

"Wait. Okay. It looks like the damage applies mostly to living quarters."

"Meaning?"

A gruff bark broke out behind them. Gupta whirled to see Gunny Thomas rushing towards him in bulked-up fury, a button hanging from a loose thread on his uniform collar, gnashing his unlit cigar.

"What's going on here? What do you mean, damage to living quarters? Do we have a body count yet? Anybody want to fill me in on this new information? Or is the military last in the loop, again?"

Every word uttered at pitch volume. The "again" was emphatic. Everyday overkill.

"Meaning," said Cassandra without altering her pace or intonation to the slightest degree, "whoever or whatever did the damage was going after people. With greatly hostile intent, I should think."

"What about life forms?"

"Sentient life mostly negative. Unless you count robots. But there's something else. Something I can't account for."

"What do you mean, you can't account for it? Is it living or not?" This query burst from both men at once.

Cassandra paused, keeping her android cool. She passed a hand through her neural weave. Static fizzed in her eyes like seltzer water.

"It's both. It's neither. But that thing, whatever it is, that's what's responsible."

"Great," said Gupta, finally giving voice to the rage that had been building inside him since the military Shanghai began. "So we're looking for a non-living, non-dead organism of some sort. I knew this was a bug hunt!"

Centuries of self-control threatened to spill over into outright violence. He reined it in, barely, and shot Thomas a menacing look. More bemused than anything else, Thomas raised his hands in a gesture of chagrined surrender.

"Bug hunt, goat fuck, you name it. Just following orders, okay chief?"

Gupta nodded. His bowels clenched. More than anything, he hated the epithet "chief". Next to "buddy," that was.

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Sifting gradually through foaming layers of sleep, men in green languidly masturbate. They fold their hands around hardcopies of Prevac porn, long-dead/frozen models posed in static positions, miming lust through an opiate haze. The green men raise misty, crusted orbits to the digital swarm of up-ended pink smeared across their own personal viewscreens. They digest packets of chalky, tasteless nutrition.

They belch, sweat, try to wake the hell up, working against the dark weight of sleep and dreams left behind in a place that men call, for the sake of uniformity, Earth II.

They rise. Cursing. Buttocks crusted with alien spores. Mad as hell at whatever rancid assrind of a useless god delivered them into this mission. Failing to see the larger picture, utterly bowing to this senseless whip that falls across their shoulders; the autonomic pattern of cash in, pay out, arrive on set, deliver lines.

Fade to black.

Not that they were stupid, or contemptible, or otherwise unworthy. These were worthy vessels, bred and selected to serve the needs of the state. In time, medals would honor their memory, speeches praise their metal, preserve this moment in which mankind faced its greatest enemy and failed, true, but drove in the spike nevertheless.

Collateral damage: item number 666 on the bill of sale.

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"Hand me that pulsar there," said Jim Townsend, one of the "Thomas's Crankheads" among the fiercest of the green men, and defiantly homosexual.

In the bunk across the way, Jim's life partner, apple-cheeked, sleekly cut Metal Todd, shrugged his shoulders, grabbed the pulse gun from his bunkbed's tier, handed it off.

The gun's silver barrel was striped and scarred with signs of wear. Shreds from GodHammer and Violent Angel stickers still clung to the metal.

"Next time you'll recharge it yourself, okay?" said Todd sulkily. "I was doing you a favor here, right?"

"Yeah man, sure, whatever."

Then, "What the fuck you going on about, ass bite?"

Slow to react, Jim was not a happy camper. His nerves burned with low-grade narcissistic fury. The two were always all over each other. Literally. An ugly current of grim and mean was fouling the air between them, a bad odor.

All the guys felt it: something more than the usual preening and unfolding of muscle, raw power. A menacing, metallic vibe you could feel in your teeth; the kind of buildup that only gave way when heads rolled. The kind of full-tilt boogie that discharged itself in fatal, final bursts of gore.

When you signed on for this job, you put your life on the line. Everybody in the corps knew that, but even when it is endgame all the time, when split-second decisions make the difference between living to tell the tale and going home in a standard-issue airtight reliquary canister, men learned to recognize certain things. They know when it's the final floorshow. No exit. Time to get your affairs together. Get your head straight with the god of your choice. What comforting words would you like engraved on your tombstone? That kind of thing.

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Putting aside their differences, Gupta, Cassandra and Thomas stood side by side. It wouldn't be an easy job, individually, spelling out the grim details. Only Cassandra knew the full extent of the peril they faced, and she was forced to face that alone. It's not a man, a bug, a beast you're hunting, she thought. It's death itself. The government-designated spokesman for the mission, Thomas walked slowly, deliberately, back and forth in front of the troops. Without a crack in his granite façade, something rippled beneath the surface, a hint of coiled strength, a warning. He flexed heavily muscled arms out from his chest, where a dark triangle sweat-soaked the regulation green. He pointed to a telescreen above their heads.

"You're probably wondering why I've called you all re," he said.  
"Ahem. That was a joke."

A few nervous laughs challenged the suddenly ominous silence.

"If you look at the images we've been able to assemble from the probe, you'll get a sense of what we're facing out there.

"If I could just get a close-up. Okay, good.

"From what Cassandra says, this space station has become infested with some sort of insidious... creeping death. I don't know how else to put it, exactly. We've looked at the manifest, and we've looked at the probe data, and, well, we're not seeing that much overlap.

"At least as far as live bodies go, anyways. He-he. Whatever is out there is doing its level best to exterminate everything that moves and breathes.

"Excepting, um, plants, I imagine."

Meanwhile, the probe was doing its digital best to convey the images, but it was fighting a battle on two fronts. Besides the job it was doing, the scouting and reconnoitering, the probe faced interference from subspace hacking-static pollution that splashed across its minute infogrids, warping the message to oblivion.

The program that hacked at the probe had been in place for at least twenty years, designed to send off a signal that looked, on the surface, like nothing more than the usual havoc of gravity and quantum conditions.

Chaos as usual, in other words.

The people who created the program did not exist. The department they worked for did not exist. Their memories were lost to time, deep-sixed onto quantum baggage racks.

Cassandra knew all this, but telling her fellow commanders was something else again. If they realized they were stepping out on the old suicide's ledge, they wouldn't be able to complete the mission, now would they? That mission being: the retrieval of Jason Voorhees.

Intact.

The rest was bloody gravy.

That was the painful truth. For the Dr Strangeloves down there in the Pentagram, drooling over their crystal balls and death rays, the

ambivalent life of a single monster weighed more than that of an actual citizen, much less soldier, of the New American Republic.

What a boon for the harvesters of death. But these guys? Cassandra looked around her. Flesh for the fucking beast. And to think: they saw her as no more than a simple machine. That was the laugh of the century.

"The strategy I've worked out is two-pronged," Thomas broke in. "He-he. That means first of all that yes, my black dick is superior, and yes, I might be a hybrid or some shit. You never know, right?

"First, we'll need an advance guard to give us more detail on this situation. I'm not telling you this will be easy. In fact, when I ask for volunteers, I ask with the knowledge, that I'm also passing on to you guys, that the odds against surviving this motherfucker are not looking very good.

"Okay?"

"Yo, fuck this man," said PFC Randall Hopkins, raising the black chrome bulk of his pulse gun level with his ripped shoulder. "I got a wife and kids, I got two more years in the white man's army, and you're telling me I don't have a choice? I'm marching straight to my grave and shit? Yo man, I did not sign up for this."

"Yeah, well..." Thomas began again.

"The deal is, you did sign up for this. And I'm not going to sugarcoat for you. The pain is for real. I'm not going to powder your balls and tell you it's all good. It's not. Now we're going to do this bravely, and with dignity, and with God's motherfuckin' help. But we're going to do this. And I need volunteers to reconnoiter. Could I see a show of hands?"

Hopkins hung back for a second; the stress of mixed emotions writing itself across his face in beads of sweat. "Yo man, I ain't no coward, yo..."

"Hopkins, is that your hand I see coming up?"

Hopkins shrugged and reluctantly raised his hand. His diode-crusted dog tags jangled as they slipped down from his raised, muscular wrist.

"That's more like it. Who else? We can do this the easy way, or I can point a fucking rifle at your head and make you do it. But I'm a

humanitarian, in my own way."

He paused a second. "Okay, I was just fucking with you there. Humanitarians are not welcome in my outfit."

He waited a few more painful seconds. "All right, I'm seeing more hands. More hands, more hands. Yes—you, you, you and you. Come forward."

The ones who stepped forward were not happy to be there. But the very stress of the situation, exerting as it did its own centrifugal force, kept them there. Like iron filings flung toward a huge magnet, five men and women stood ready to circumscribe their own graves; shovels poised at shoulder-level.

"Ready? Okay, walk this way." He demonstrated.

More than ever in his life, Gunny Thomas felt his command as a palpable weight on his back as his troops headed for the shuttle-launch bay. His troops filed in formation. They followed the model to the letter. They bore themselves with dignity, not shirking their duty, however hard. They walked in line towards some kind of fucked-up immortality. The track lighting that showed them their way seemed to prep fresh cryogenic beds; a posterity overseen by machines of loving grace.

Thomas had never been prouder to be a soldier. This was what it all came down to. It was more than a weight you carried; it was what you were.

From the bridge, Gupta's voice cut in clean and swift on Thomas's headset. "Is this channel working?"

"Yes it is, captain."

"Stand by for shuttle offload."

"Aye, aye."

Weapons slung forward, they poured down the corridor towards the shuttle bay doors. The doors slicked open as though an invisible tracer simply burned new configurations through the walls. Fine and finally drilled, helmeted and suited, the best and brightest of the NAR's disposable population tromped down into the guts of the shuttle.

"Lock and load."

"Yes, sir."

"Seal the hatches."

"Done."

"And sharpen those fucking hatchet blades!"

"Done and done. Sir."

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"Sir?"

Deafening silence.

"Sir, I can't see a fucking thing in front of me." "Don't have to. Please tell me you know how to operate a fucking helmet."

"Sir?"

Thomas punched the round shell, topping the soldier walking point.

"Hey white boy," he yelled through the frosted helmet. "Can you hear me?"

"Sir?"

"Okay," said Thomas. He was severely put out. "Everybody hold it. I see we're going to have to do an equipment check."

A virtual menagerie of grunts and squeals greeted this information, "No, man!" Gunny was talking shit. Unless some fresh meat PFC up there wasn't prepped, in which case, they were all fucked, weren't they? But weren't they all fucked anyway?

However hard you polished this turd, all you wound up with, in the end, was a shining turd.

The men and women all felt it: infinitely valuable heartbeats of life were being sucked away by some moron, who nonetheless, in this particular suspended nanosecond, wielded all kinds of power.

The time had come for basic crowd control. Thomas put up his hand. "Okay, first of all, nobody is going anywhere. I can feel you champing at the bit, and believe me, I think we all want to, ahem, savor the moment, you know?"

"But meanwhile," he slapped the soldier in front of him. "Meanwhile we have a technical situation. How's that 'quipment situation looking beyotch?"

"Loud and clear," came out scrambled but still recognizable. As though someone had thrown a switch signaling the battle had begun for real, the rest of the troops simultaneously boomed a short protocol—a little zip and squiggle meaning "shit is ready to rock"—through their own headsets.

Here came everybody loud and clear, with just a faintest tinge of a mocking echo, because they were marching right into a fog bank. And somewhere, lurking in the midst of this incongruous jungle setting in the depths of space, they would encounter an enemy more terrible than any they had yet encountered in their worst nightmares.

So had it all been worth it? The tears, the sacrifice, years of training, shaping, firming their flesh against padded targets and paper dummies? Nothing prepared you, if ever it could, for this: a really big, powerful motherfucking stormtrooper of death, strapping some kind of weaponry nobody in civilized creation had seen before.

Had they?

Because like Golem in the dark there, the thing had mutated. Grown new and terrible cells. Formed relationships along awesome ladders of genetic judgment, cellular armies built for one clear purpose: elimination of the human genome.

Pulsar guns forward, the grunts moved in modular snake formation. Unseen eyes watched through clusters of oily leaves. Clouds of white steam rolled over the grunts' heads. The foliage was nearly impenetrable and between the steam, the leaves and the vines, they could barely see a foot in front of their faces.

As they pressed forward blindly, they were overwhelmed by flashes of light, puddles of darkness, slashing daggers of consciousness and the unbearable heat of it all. Because it was what you did, wasn't it. It was your life versus theirs, a thin web more fragile by the second.

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Randall Hopkins stalled at the bottom of the stairway. He felt something buzzing around his head, more presence than substance. Hopkins shivered at what he saw. The mummified body floating at the level of his head just dropped, hanging from a tangled skein of

spider web. There were more in there. Heads lined smartly with feet, mouths frozen in ultimate howls. Jagged rows of teeth. Eyes like moldy balloons, sagging on optic stalks.

The entire wall was a tomb, a charnel house where shards of metal fused with organic bits: threads of veins; chalk white bones, scrimshawed with molecular acid; dark campfire tales, told in amine groups and hemoglobin.

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More bodies and pieces of body came tumbling over his shoulder, as the gravity needle kicked in again. A giant's boot, slamming dead bits to the floor. Moribund organic data. A tickling feeling in his neck.

Huh?

Then slow, sick watching, an unfurled organic flag, as Hopkins's body plummeted away from his head.

The brain can live an entire minute without oxygen, just enough time for a person's life to flash before their eyes, as those eyes get a bigger, better, wide-angle view on the meatball. Three hundred and sixty degrees, surround sound. Nerves ripped like silver horses. Doubts, goodbyes, resentment and rage—a null set.

Lifelong investments of care: goodbye.

For a moment, the grunts behind Hopkins weren't aware that a machete had taken his head; the head itself lost in the gridwork above the service hatch.

Then the body sank in front of them, spurting gore. Hopkins's neck looked like a giant can opener had serrated it. Ants stomped by a giant foot, the grunts scattered around the carnage.

"What's going on?" Thomas yelled. "Why is this train not moving?"

"Sir, we took a lethal hit."

"Beg pardon?"

"A lethal hit, sir."

"Well don't tell me what I need, I know that shit. Make that two fingers of King Hellboy crank, okay? Let's stay focused here. Regroup in phalanx formation."

But what was phalanx formation, exactly? Was that just some military techno-bullshit Gunny spewed out now because he was scared crapless like the rest of them? Did he know what he was talking about? Had they been sent there from their loved ones simply to be picked off by a fucking giant leech of some sort? A biomachine of total death? At least the insurance premiums were genuine.

Metal Todd coughed into his headset. "Refresh on phalanx formation, sir."

Thomas deeply regretted not being able to chew his cigar within the confines of the helmet.

"Phalanx formation: look at your infogrids. I'm uploading right now."

Thomas rolled his eyeballs at the command and control screen in his suit. Within five seconds, the info had reached the entire squad.

"Good, right. We're rolling."

A section of troops slid out ahead; an equal number slipped behind.

But somebody was still walking point, phalanx or no. This was a modified wing position. No room in the corridor for a true 4D mod, but close enough for government work.

Metal Todd was streaming so much adrenaline he was ready to take on an entire pissed-off army of aliens and their bitch mother. Or whatever the fuck this thing was. Todd was next to go, cut to ribbons in an instant. The grunts immediately behind him refreshed the viewscreens on their helmets. Built in microwipers strained to wash off the slick red shower.

Thomas called halt.

"Guys, we're going to have to regroup. Pulsar guns full. We're going to have to go super high tech on his ass."

The white shroud beyond suddenly blazed with green, crosscut with a graphic network of gridlines. Caught in the net glowed a mammoth DNA signature, and as one the grunts opened fire on its source.

Targeted, blasted through the cargo bay door, down a three-storey drop, to lie prone, splayed in the middle of an infotainment gallery.

"Let's clean up some of this smoke, ladies and gents."

The same pulsar guns that had delivered the deadly blast turned suction devices. Gloomy smoke poured backward into the muzzles of thirty weapons.

"That's right," said Thomas. "Suck it up, people."

Grinning at his joke. Nobody smiled back.

In thirty seconds, the view was clear. The blast had punched a mammoth hole in the door, letting out on a thin band of railing. Downstairs, three shiny metal bands circled spiral galleries like ribs on an android vertebra.

Fifty feet below lay the monster, an immaculate corpse.

"Woah gunny," said Lisa Maxell, head of the Special Weapons detail. "We're going down into that?"

Thomas laughed. "Why do you think we're packing this shit?" He touched his backpack on a plate in the side, out from which sprang a coil of ultralight, ultrastrong Nanobar rope. What looked like manacles followed hard upon it. Thomas jangled the thick cuffs like a prison warden.

Lisa stopped, rotating her head. "Uh, no we don't."

"Listen lady, I give the orders around here. We're going down on my count of three. You and you, and you three there. Sling 'em on and ring 'em off."

"Sir, no disrespect, but how do we know he's dead?"

"That's what we're going to find out. Okay, let's move ass!"

Lisa reluctantly ejected her own climbing equipment, slammed the self-closing ring on the railing and barreled over the side. Alongside her, Thomas and the rest of the team clamped and swung.

Jason still lay there.

They were halfway down the balcony, brains tilting at windmills of fractal chaos, when the fear began to take hold. Something was very wrong. Jason had simply... disappeared.

"Okay guys, something's up." Thomas's voice boomed in their headsets. "We've lost our dead-alive freaky deek."

Jason's DNA signature had blipped out. Totally fucking vaporized. When you got right down to it, Mr Voorhees was officially a nowhere man.

Their magnetic boots clamped on the steel surface of the infotainment gallery. Twenty feet beyond, a Prevac passive played on a nanotech swarm, here doubling as a wraparound silver screen, sixty feet tall.

The gallery featured an old-fashioned movie theater, tier upon tier of red plush velvet seats carrying dozens—hundreds—of corpses. Having reached rigor mortis, some sat with huge grins engraved on their faces. An alert audience. Overly alert, even. Oddly familiar imagery flashed up on the screen: a naked, bloody girl, scrambling through a dark, dense green forest. Following the girl, a maniac in a white mask. Wanting, wishing to make her dead.

The maniac closed on the girl. With monstrous concentrated force, he speared her against a tree. She slumped. Her pretty mouth spouted blood. A diagonal rip divided the screen. A huge machete blade tore through, followed by a colossal figure: half man, half cyborg. The creature stood immobile in front of the ripped screen, as though suddenly frozen. Behind him, the scene had switched. A campfire. A counselor telling ghost stories; horror stories, about a boy who drowned, about a monster who could not be killed. The creature cricked its head, slowly, deliberately, summing up the prey.

"What the fu—" Thomas managed.

But it was too late. As fast as the words left his mouth, the five soldiers at his side exploded, a thick rainbow spray of blood and intestinal sludge.

"Oh fuck me," Thomas muttered softly. "I should have brought a cigar."

Through flickering eyelashes, he saw the bright crisscrossed blade lines arranged against his flesh like a cookie-cutter.

Then he fell to pieces.

\*\*\*

Mechanical animals propelled by recondite nanotech, arachnid bubbles of black chrome scurried in on telescopic limbs. They poured out from service conduits hidden behind Utility Fog like a stream of black lava.

The spider-stuff coalesced into chitinous globules, sprouting legs like tripods.

They were a chatter of oozing mandibles, pulsing globs of mercury, complete with their corporate branding, a triangle of red dots glowing on black chrome. Three angry digits: 666.

The spiders extruded loops of sticky thread from dark bellies. Jason batted at the web with his machete, automatic swats with machine-tooled reaction time. The spiders didn't seem to mind, dragging Jason to the ground like a potted Gulliver, circles of web squeezing the pink brain like mud through a kid's fist.

Loops cinched tight against the metal mask and the massive chest, the ripped forearms and the tree-trunk legs. Loops crisscrossed the machete, dragged down that slashing arm. Jason Voorhees was stuffed into a tight cocoon, a victim of the same technology that made him a superkiller.

The walls bent around him, sealing the monster in an impermeable metal casket.

The beast was safe, ready for transport. The spiders bore the casket onto the ship and slotted it into a prepared service bay.

Then, the spiders killed the ship's remaining crew; Cassandra's head leaking obscure fluids, her brain still functioned helplessly, sealed up within the fulfillment of her prophecy. Gupta lay by her side, clutching his first mate's headless body, praying to Shiva, bleeding out from thousands of tiny bites.

The spiders, massed once again into the black lava flow, retreated. Bodies lay broken, wasted and empty; hulks of disposable tissue.

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A blanket of nanoflies swarms down, a storm of genetic obliteration, planting evil seeds. And the death process speeds: accelerated biofilm. Maggots rend the hardening flesh. Precisely engineered bacteria swarm bodies, which puff up like macabre balloons. They liquefy, bubble and burst down to skeletons.

Skeletons disintegrate into piles of dust sucked up by hidden vacuum tubes. The *Marduk* floats in deep, sparkling space, pristine

and evacuated but for its sinister cargo.

Coordinates blink on the screen, marking the package for deployment. Blue vapor flash sucks the ship into hyperdrive.

Target: Elysium, the Moon.

Crew: disposable.

Mission accomplished.

# TWO

April Carlson, the pampered, only daughter of Senator Douglas Carlson, liked to wake to the world on her own terms. Terms, that is, not dictated by her pesky eight year-old brother, Bobby, a roving technohead with big dreams of national science fair projects and a personality touched by the faintest trace of Asperger syndrome. (The latter manifested itself in his ability to recite gigachunks of the Interplanetary Code without visible strain, while his more socially proficient intelligence was wasted in tasking his big sister's hair-trigger nerves.)

April preferred the transition from dreaming to waking to be as painless as possible. Could it please be kind, take the form of a shimmering morph or an anime fairy with a sparkling wand? But on this particular morning, April sprang awake in shock-cut mode. She had the sensation of being eaten alive by a swarm of heavy metal mosquitoes.

"Bobby dearest, I will seriously fucking kill you for this," she screamed, but this only caused the nanomites to dig in deeper with ferocious pincers.

"How did you shut off my shimmering morph?" she wailed. "And how did these mites get into my room anyway?"

"I totally had it fumigated for nanopests!"

Sabrina Carlson was watching the morning news while a virile new machine toy, the Hunk, stimulated her muscles. She heard her children fighting, a tinny drone from invisible speakers set up above the entertainment console. An external noise, but one she would have to attend to.

Above the fake mahogany, set in a crystal frame, a holovid of Sabrina's great-great-grandmother tending her rose bushes looped in a cycle that began, and ended, with a close-up smile, panned to a single, perfectly formed black tiger rose, froze, broke up and looped again.

Oma would have been horribly crushed to learn how swiftly her bloodline could deteriorate. Fortunately, Oma was in cold storage,

enjoying the endless tropical vacation she spent her life savings to afford.

At least her head was. Her body, packed in a separate nitrogen bath, enjoyed its fleshly paradise unencumbered, tickled by the very latest neuromuscular stimulators.

Essentially, dead as a rock.

The drone got louder. In the kitchen, an alarm system subroutine blinked to life.

"Nanny, turn it off," Sabrina told the smarthouse module. Both alarm and drone vanished, leaving a silence that Sabrina's brain haunted with dreadful conjectures. Why did she have to be the one to discipline on the kids? But of course, that had been her decision too; to stay at home and write the routine codes, to configure her husband's vacations and off-planet expeditions, to hack the opposing candidate's re-election plans.

Just the usual quotidian housewifely duties. Technically, most of this was illegal. But since everybody in New Washingtonia did it, only those outside the loop courted trouble. The gold band of power, they called it, which so far had proved as solid as it sounded.

So here she was, Sabrina Carlson, Mrs Senator Carlson, the entire day's work laid out for her, and she couldn't even count on the smarthouse mod to do its job.

"April and Robert Carlson, you are to stay right where you are," barked Sabrina through the com.

She hoped that sounded sufficiently stern.

\*\*\*

The final days of the spring semester had been rough. Everyone at New Rose High was feeling the burn. Everyone.

Donning special suits, teachers prepped for surgery, sterner themselves for the blood rites of Aesculapius. Dirty deeds were considered, parsed, dismissed as insufficiently evil.

On the agenda were Sadean violations of the student body. Among the methods discussed: strangulation, flaying alive, immolation, boiling in vats of molecular acid and burial alive, with or without a

posse of angry gerbils. (A little something to sweeten the mix, to keep the motherfuckers ticking like binary acid time bombs.)

Legal repercussions aside, many faculties considered such a course morally tenable. Logical even, given the circumstances. But would society accept it? There lay the question. The kids were pushing it to new extremes, a micro paradigm shift on the indiscipline chart. And despite ZPG, humans were still sprouting up like 'shrooms on shit.

More and more of the ugly brutes every day. Getting a lot shorter, too. More hirsute. Was this some horrible liberal conspiracy? Were Extreme Measures called for? Had they reached La Limite? The frontier? That final floorshow everyone knew was coming, but couldn't just say so and go on living with the same smooth control?

Were those the trumpets of Doom sounding, oh so faintly, from the upper air? Or was this just another eschatological tea party?

\*\*\*

On this one day (which stood out for no reason, called zero attention to itself, and basically begged to be left alone) the world went crazy. Not subtly crazy. Not crazy in an "if you didn't know me, you wouldn't think I'm acting unusual" kind of a way. Severely batshit crazy. Okay? Check this out: New Rose High was like Patient Zero in this equation. The one that starts it all.

You know. Like with the Blue Death? Eh?

Girls ran wild, flinging panties into bushes, drinking forbidden elixirs, dancing naked under the Baobob tree, upgrading to new brain substrates, getting whacked on the Mandelbort. Anointing their bodies with toxic gels, openly masturbating at library windows, bumpgrind peepshows of the subconscious mind. Showing off vast tracts of immaculately kept foliage.

Nip 'n tuck. Wet inserts.

The boys followed in packs, leather wolves in letter jackets. Blazing with cryptoglyphic fractals. Obsequious followers of new metal gods. There was something in the air. Something crazy. Not like the santanawinds, but close. Like the hoofprints of a new, upgraded devil messiah. But why?

Was it just some passing phase? The spring fever? The Moon Crazies? The Just Plain Crazies Because Nothing is Crazier than Just Plain Crazy Crazies? Was this standard for teenage behavior? Could they perhaps be drinking the forbidden hooch? Sampling the pill clearly marked, "Not for sampling purposes. You must be committed to the full reality hack." Could they be Mandelbrot addicts?

Surely not. The thought was too heinous, too depraved. It involved conceptualizations clearly traumatic on the psychic level. It meant that some students might indeed have obtained some of the forbidden smart technology. Some of the wisdom of the Korkovs. They might be upgrading without government-approved upgrade devices. They might be chanting some unknown pagan chant. Digesting fuck only knows what kind of weird mycopia.

And chanelling...

This was the worst part, because it meant that their futures as educators of youth were as much as fucked. Fucked by Mr Fuck. Channeling Akasha.net. Learning everything their ancestors ever knew, only with digital clarity. In body stereo. With fun lights and colors.

Actual geometry. Real numbers. No. It couldn't be.

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Slurping cups of a mythological beverage called "coffee", instructors commiserated in the faculty lounge. It had happened; the thing that could not be. And something would have to be done about it, something drastic. Things hadn't been this bad for educators since the early 21st Century (so far, a high water mark for students run amok).

"Let me get this straight," said Camille Herrera, a veteran teacher, to her office mate, Sandoval Perkins, settling back in an antique Prevac sofa. "One of your kids hacked the student code of conduct?"

"Uh-huh. Something about mandatory peyote use."

"Well, I don't see where that's much of a problem. I mean, he was just advocating, right? He didn't say that we all had to pop a button before class or be put on administrative probation. Right?"

Perkins cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding. At least, I think I'm kidding. You know for some of these New Aboriginals, peyote is considered a sacrament."

"Not in my neighborhood it isn't," Perkins replied.

He paused to consider. "I will admit, there's some legitimate research advancing peyote use for advanced consciousness exploration. But I don't think my kids are ready for that yet. Ketamine and X I can see, yeah, definitely, but the sacred cactus? Don't think so. They're too busy getting used to the latest substrates —fun with your new brain and all that.

"Anyway, Joseph, my little hacker, well, that's a face that must die."

"I hear you," said Herrera. "Substrate is the pocket calculator of the 25th Century."

"Hell, it's the writing of the 25th Century," said Perkins. "Remember Plato's myth of Thoth?"

"How could I forget? We all had to upload that mother till we could say it backwards in our sleep, with or without NLP prompts. Yeah, I know. I guess we're just old-fashioned."

"Speak for yourself."

A pause, for purposes of contemplation.

"You've seen ArtGod, Version six point six, six?" said Perkins.

"Can't say I have, no. Sounds positively Cronenbergian."

"Yeah, it is."

"Short for 'Thou Art God' I suppose." Sandoval was always going on about these reality hacks, full metal subroutines for the creation and destruction of fractal universes. Who did he think he was, anyway? Lord Shiva?

Herrera looked over the cubicle at her colleague, Yeah, I guess he does, she thought. And laughed to herself.

"No, this time it just means Art God. Master of all media, that kind of thing. Pretty clever all the same."

"I'll have to download it sometime."

"I've got a copy in my car."

"Cool," said Herrera.

"Tincture?" She patted her purse.

"You read my mind."

"Ah Pook the Destroyer?" Herrera asked, referring to a new concoction also known as "Demon in a Bottle."

"Make it so," said Perkins, toasting the air, adding mentally, I love these quiet moments before the storm.

\*\*\*

The most anticipated event of the New Rose High social calendar, the Spring Fling, gathered glam cred over the years. As the 25th Century veered toward the halfway mark, that cred grew stronger, enhanced by virtue of its own perfect trajectory through space-time. It gleamed with something near total perfection. Spring Fling was chill. It was fly. It was where you were this Saturday night.

\*\*\*

After a sweet shower, April spruced before the mirror. She smiled; at last, March was history. The wasteland filled back with buds. Fractal traceries of green vine flourished in the interstices of NeoVictorian mansions. She kissed her cold reflection, saw herself in stereo.

Vines on the wall entwined her mirrored face like a Prevac, Pre-Raphaelite statue on the green juice. She reached into the top left-hand cupboard, the place she stored her precious flask of Prevac liquor. And saw the creature: lurking, wearing a mask. Out for blood.

What?

"Bobby! Oh my God. You're so dead."

April's little brother put down his plastic machete and tugged off his outlaw hockey mask, then fled.

"Ugh," said April, returning to the mirror. She fished the flask from the cupboard. Had a pop. Tasted like dead skunk. No. Tasted like dead skunk wished it tasted. In thirty seconds, her nerve balance was restored. In a minute, April was worry-free.

Pesky little brothers floated in a discretionary bubble, which April could jet into outer space at will. Even if Bobby were to wrest himself

away from mom and pick up where he left off, April still held the bubble option like a little goody on her index finger.

She smiled at herself. Looking good, she told her reflection. Looking extremely sharp. From the bottom: tightly laced, dangerous go-boots. Glint of (non-lethal) spikes up the side, slightly ripped nanopore fishnets.

Blue PVC miniskirt flashing with her favorite 'glyph character. The Boopster, of course, bullet belt, loaded with caps of liquid LQ. Midriff: navel piercing, girlie N-shirt, black, chains, amulets. On her arms: pinpoint flares of more (non-lethal) spikes, embedded in collagen vat-grown black leather. On her face: war tattoos (nanotech implants.) On her head: short, shocking pink hair.

Tonight was going to be memorable; just quite possibly, the best Fling of the decade. April's best friend, Mischa Laroque, helmed the student entertainment committee. And if anybody knew how to put on a Fling, it was Mischa.

Mischa rocked. Mischa rocked hard. Unfortunately, an entire day yawned before her.

They had to show up at school. Mould shapely butts to seats. They had to pretend, at least, to concentrate. New Rose High was very strict and old-fashioned that way—no telepresencing allowed. You had to walk your original flesh into an actual seat.

What would they think of next? Homework?

True, that seat was equipped with state-of-the-art vircher gear: A hands-free exobot made of flesh-meshing wire, so light you barely knew you were wearing it. The seat had multiple flight settings, but students were mostly encouraged not to float during class (AV presentations being a vital exception to the rule).

Otherwise, the school conduct manual spelled it out specifically: "floating is for emergencies only".

April stepped a violet-strapped instep onto the airbus.

"Mischa, oh my God!"

April and Mischa embraced, ignoring the sensor buzzer that meant, Sit down and strap in for the automated ride. And thanks for your participation in a completely artificial environment! It was more of a kick to really feel the force of the G's as the old-fashioned

bus lurched down New Rose Boulevard toward the gleaming spires of the high school. That old gothic touch never hurt a bit.

"I love this part," said Mischa, as the bus began to rapidly vibrate. The friends hugged as the bus cut down through a hyperport connection, manifested in front of the school from a cloud of blue vapor.

"So what have you been doing with yourself, girl?" said April, thrilled beyond belief. An actual Mischa sighting was well beyond cool, shitloads beyond chill, certainly several Earth Primes advanced beyond the merely necrotic.

To see her in the flesh somehow stamped one with a primal imprimatur. It was like a sighting a deity on her off-hours; Kali moonlighting at the Tastee-Freeze. Or something.

Mischa idly played with a spiral of blue-black hair. The way she played with April's heart. And tongue.

"The usual, you know; studying way too much, plugging away at the books, keeping myself hyperinformed, infotained, luxuriated, exfoliated, medicated, reloaded and simplified down to a compact, easy to understand format."

April smiled, baffled. There was something about Mischa's elaborate languor that bespoke intimate knowledge of the dwarf cannabis sativa bud. April smoked, of course, but then again, she read too. It didn't mean the same thing.

Mischa was special somehow. She inhabited a different element than most mortals. She had the gift: la facultad, the understanding.

"Where do we toke up today?" April asked.

"I guess we could use, I don't know, the van," Mischa said, deadpan.

"I mean, it's convenient, and it's already parked and everything."

They always smoked up in the van.

"We've got like twenty minutes till homeroom."

"Okay," Mischa said. "On y va."

At New Rose High, early Prevac nostalgia had stormed the citadel of chill. The fashion for actual drugs was one such trend index. April and Mischa settled in the back of the van, reclining into foam-based

material so soft and comfortable it formed itself around them. A Platonic cave, if Plato were so lucky.

The bong ascended from the bottom of the van. The font of worship was a three foot tall purple dragon with flaming jade eyes. Flexible, of course, and freshly filled with a mix of tinctures. And smart media for extra flavor.

"Anyway..." Mischa was always saying in yet another appendix to one of her ceaseless monologues. "Oh and anyway," as though caught between straps of the dark marmalade, but freeing herself at the last possible second, "I think I'm going with Tim."

"Tim the strange and bizarrely coiffed wizard? To the Fling? No fucking way, girlfriend! Shut up. You're amazing. When were you going to tell me this shit?"

Mischa pretended to yawn. "Well you know darling, I can't just right out and say it. Right? That would be so, I don't know, déclassé of me. A girl must protect her reputation for mystery."

April laughed. "I don't think your cover's anywhere near being blown, darling."

"You think?" Mischa paused to breathe. "Yes, definitely. Tim is gorgeous, and—well let's just say, I'm going to have my fill tonight!"

"You are so bad," said April. "I could have sworn you were going with Steve Sanders."

"Are you kidding me?"

"To the Fling? Honey, Steve is just a fuckbuddy. I mean, let's get real, okay?"

"Hmph. Steve Sanders."

"Whatever," said April. Her hand hit an imaginary wall in front of her face. (But it was a loving "whatever")

"How about you? Who's going to shower my April with love?"

"Ah bon, toogarçons formidables," said April. The two sometimes lapsed into speed French when they smoked up. The two frequently lapsed into speed French.

"Je n'avais pas choisi, mais plutard..." She waved her hand. "Plutard."

"You're going with a 'tard?"

April hit Mischa on the shoulder. Not too hard, though. She had a special honey in mind, and this guy was definitely not a 'tard. Discreetly, April zipped open her purse. She checked to see if her GodHammer condoms were intact. They were. Excellent. Springing a leak so close to summer fun just would not do.

The only question was which boy to choose? The field swarmed with bold, imaginary contenders. April sidled back to think and smoke awhile. Later, she sidled back. To think awhile and smoke.

# THREE

Ernst Mach explained the origin of Newton's law of inertia in the following way: according to Mach, all the matter of the universe establishes the laws of inertia. Therefore, any properties belonging to the laws of physics must be extended to all matter in a given universe. In layman's terms: everything is glued, nothing is excluded.

\*\*\*

Like many great things in the 25th Century, zero gravity simulators came courtesy of those furry innovators, the Korkovs. The first zero gravity simulator put to commercial use, the Astraldome, at first drew entire families. These groups flocked to the monolith as though it were the permeable membrane of a *vita nuova*.

It soon became apparent that any educational opportunities offered by the Astraldome could easily be superseded by naughty fun. The Astraldome produced stunningly realistic holographic images from all quadrants of known space, piped in from the Sinai Observatory at New Harvard, which meant that at any given time, interested participants might observe blue giants, red dwarves and other colorful phenomena, up close.

Up real fucking close.

Naturally, when a star went supernova, the crowds flocked thither. It soon became apparent that different age groups saw different purposes for the attraction. A special gallery was set aside for young people. In spherical changing rooms, space suits could be rented at a nominal price and spray-painted over the body.

As conditions at the Astraldome were otherwise Earth-normal, Wendy, Clarissa, Katie and April considered the suits superfluous. Much like the contingent from South Rose City, four guys with hot bodies they'd invited to meet up with them. At the unmanned smart bar, the kids all crowded into a booth and dropped LQ, swallowing it with soda water. By the time the microdose had kicked in, time itself had become essentially irrelevant.

Only one amine group away from what they used to call acid, LQ made Owsley, the acid king of Earth Prime in the 1960s, look like a rank amateur.

The Astraldome was worth that little edge of complexity. It simply rocked harder when you could enjoy a visit in synaesthetic swarm sound. Tonight, the Astraldome played host to New Rose High's annual Spring Fling.

Today's special event was indeed extraordinary: the birth of a new solar system. Vast clouds of gas and molten rock filled the Astraldome. Even scaled down, the objects in the fractal mirrors were still proportionately so large, it was possible to play hide and seek within and between them.

So much fun, you could actually hurt yourself this way.

In actual space, it's true: no one can hear you scream, simply because there's no atmosphere to support the sounds of anguish. Or frenzy. Or ecstasy.

This was not true of the Astraldome. The building rang with screams and shouts, giggles and hollers; and later, the sounds of passion and sloppy gropings. And groupings.

Tim, Mischa and April formed their own star cluster, fingertips touching. That was all they needed. The LQ made it possible to mind-merge, to enter into connection.

They had translated themselves out of time and space, becoming one thing: a live, wriggling, glowing, organism. With teeth.

Even the slightest touch of the fingertips became delirious, unstable. Another touch completely loosened joints. Unhinged limbs. Made skeletons glow. With LQ, molecular shattering occurs at the quantum level. At higher fractal levels, impact on the human specimen becomes less and less severe. April felt Tim behind her. She eased her ass against him. She had slipped into a distant zone of a larger self, augmented with a flesh package. Boundaries of personality and bodily dimensions became hazarded, confused. Gravity made little sense.

April touched Mischa, who was floating above her, and hauled her down by her right leg. With a slight movement of his legs, Tim rotated.

They went ass over, attached together with April as the intermediary, swallowed up in the mouth of a superhuman desire that would bring them to desperate orgasm in a few seconds. They had supernovaed together. It was very good.

\*\*\*

The girls in the mall flow on smooth gridlines, responding to flashpoints of subliminal infomontage: precise demographics of the moment, including brain chemical balances, a dip here, a peak there.

They are sleek, these divas of the immaculate cube. Fog ghosts of the consumer underground. They are the girls in the mall.

What do they seek, these free-range consumers? These acolytes of Prevac pastiche? Why do they return to the scene of past heartache and future crimes, only to relive it all in desperate prime-time colors?

Are they hardwired to their fates, wired to the monkey meat at some deep genetic level? Is it a karmic deal, the eternal round of samsara?

Do they come to the mall because they always came there before? First in strollers, then as toddlers, taking first tentative steps beyond the outer darkness, into the light, into the land of the dead. A light kept chilled and glowing just for them. A place to always shine.

The girls in the mall seek comfort. Cohesion. Patterns. They want their journeys to resemble one another, their steps charted down to infinitesimal detail. To differ is death. Deviation wrings from their hearts the deepest of horror. They are well trained. Responsive.

Good shoppers.

The boys in the mall seek the girls. But they seek other things too. They play roving games of splatter tag, bloody rounds blistering N-shirts inset with low-grade explosive explosive devices—squibs called "Romeros"—that answer certain radio frequencies with a nonlethal mix of red fluids.

The boys laugh at the girls and pull out their hair, as boys have done for millennia. Sometimes they pinch off multicolored locks of sense implants.

These hair attachments a form of NIT (neural interface technology) known as biosofts—contain multilayered nanocircuitry that, among other things, provide an instant refresher course in most known Earth II technologies, games and art forms.

The girl who loses her upgrades to a boy must win back her softs—her "honor"—and either defeat the boy in combat, or succumb to his advances.

Some girls choose to succumb. Others are chosen. It is like that. To the victor, the spoils. And to the vircher, the game platform. Virtual hockey, popularly known as VirchHock, is perhaps the most popular sport for NAR teens of the 25th Century.

Many theories strive to account for its popularity. Some place its allure at the dainty feet of taboo. After all, the sport had been outlawed for more than four centuries, long enough to develop an ethos. A mythology, even. The kind of respect that is born out of serious pain and suffering.

Like a stream of nano ants, the boys and girls pour down into the bowels of the mall. Lighting their way, patches of track lighting simulate electrical storms. Inside their brains, artificially-stoked endorphins explode. Make powerful, complex patterns worthy of the Mandelbrot juice. Because you could see the game even before it had taken place. That was the genius of virtual hockey.

Winners and losers decided long before any contest, the girls had chosen the boys who would possess them later that night. The boys decided what flavor of celebratory syrup they would sip.

As they sat, sated and glowing, after another successful score.

Sometimes the girls played the boys. At other times, in fact most often, the girls played other girls and usually for something much more serious than a date.

They played for temporary ownership, of other lymph gland possessing humans.

\*\*\*

Wendy whispered in April's ear: "So, should I just whip your ass right now, or do you want to play a game and remove all possible

doubt?"

April looked up. She was deeply engrossed. Fine tuneage. GodHammer, to be precise.

"What?" She yelled. GodHammer's first pressing on the Mandelbrot media. A fractal escalation of sight and sound so monumental it was known to cause brain hemorrhage in certain, uh, specimens.

"You heard what I said."

"You mean you want to play some VirchHock. Well why didn't you just say so?"

"I was saying so, you dumb bitch."

"I love it when you're cranky," said April, smiling.

Hand in hand, the girls poured fleshy stalks down the artificial stairwell. And much like a fairytale, as their feet descended level by the level, the staircase grew. Soon they were in the well—a deep video hive, scooped from the mall's innards. The arena.

A vast black rectangle, its borders studded with dozens of diamond lights. The utopia of game designs, sketched in blood. Blood on ice. Always popular with the ladies.

\*\*\*

Wendy was goalie. She was always goalie. She loved the mask, the sheer snugness with which it fit around her head; a tight, protective parabola closing them off, closing herself in.

Fair is foul and foul is fair. Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Deliberately, she snapped on the datagloves, carefully tapping each uplink. Adjusted the mask/glove feed, fiddled with the joy module that maneuvered her stick. Owning the phallus, the theorists called it.

Perfection, she called it.

What could cyborg theory tell a girl that she couldn't pick up from a holovid? And you just can't fuck cyborg theory! Hel-lo?

Behind shadowed holes, she saw the game as a predator would. Fleet, aerial movements in virtual space. Palatable whirlwinds. Live

girls. More meat for the fucking beast. She could feel herself become aroused, a ticking wet binary dream bomb.

When she wore the mask, trivial fears dripped from her body; she felt a pulse, power driving through her system. A green fuse. A god hammer. It was sex, killing, the craft that shaped dreams; larger than her, larger than the game. As April drove the puck down the rink towards her, Wendy lovingly regarded her friend.

And shared the monster's eyes, braced herself, evil under rippling glass, patting her mitts together.

Come on, girl. Just try me.

Wendy closed her eyes for the impact and felt the puck from the blow it dealt her, before she took her turn and Slamdanced the disc in some fucking face.

April's head exploded. Hot fragments of skull curled and decayed into digital blackness. Within an inch of the mask, April skidded to a halt.

"You just never give up, do you?" Wendy breathed.

April threw up a glove. Her face covered in blood.

"No, I guess I just never do," she said, spitting out bits of broken teeth.

\*\*\*

Amanda Cartwright was having a rough night. She looked it too. Her hair, usually kept in the hypercorrect format prescribed by the teen fashion glyph *Nouvelle Vogue*, this evening resembled the crusty hide of a public menace from one of the less sophisticated Prevac horror passives.

She needed a bath; her skin was oily. An unknown eruption was assembling itself, slowly yet relentlessly, on her neck. And that wasn't even the scary part

But all that could wait had to because something was definitely rotten in Denmark (or at least really pushing its sell by date). Amanda's dad did PR for the government, which is how she was able to sneak preview the whole Althusserian ideological apparatus. (Yeah, that thing.)

Basically, Amanda saw NAR propaganda in its beta stage. Cute, those little mendacities, ain't they? Growing like obscene crystals. Lies and damned lies, silent stalkers of the ideosphere. No-neck monsters looking for a grip, or a stretch of new flesh, ripe for the reality hacking.

Being able to see the mindfuck formulated from the ground up, Amanda had grown immune to its charms, her skin thickened to its lurking horrors.

At seventeen, she had the rare privilege of seeing the universe turned inside out—a little darklight twinkling—every time a politician wished to promote his or her new vision.

Once that vision proved ineffective, the universe snapped back in place again. Like a mask, the latest seal over a cup of ever-present darkness. Nearly good as new, right? See how it handles on corners.

Only then could Amanda see the stretch marks. But this one was different. She could tell. Of late, Mr Cartwright had been unusually secretive, puttering around the den in flashing glyptic high-tops, drinking more old school beverages than was standard even for his double-liver status. (Not that they were exactly giving away double-liver licenses these days.)

"I'm sorry honey," he told Amanda when she came into his study, bedraggled. "It's this new project."

Amanda slumped down onto the sofa that faced his desk. Elaborate streams of data poured from the Cartwright ceiling, creating the impression—and some of the Triadic tang, yet—of a Prevac Chinese New Year. Red dragons: smashed by her nose as protean forms, dragging slender streaks of silver cordite behind them.

Amanda wrinkled her nose. She caught a slight whiff: bad egg.

"I know, Dad," said Amanda. "I know you've been preoccupied. It's got nothing to do with me though, right?" (Was it simply flatulence?)

"Honey, of course not. What gave you that idea?"

Amanda loved it when her dad took on that tone, his mock gruff edge melting her heart. (Like a sugarcube dipped in the Blue Death.)

She pretended to pout. "Well, you haven't said a word to me all week."

"Is that true?" Aaron Cartwright looked up.

"Well it is permitted, right?" she said.

At sixty, Cartwright was still a handsome man, his silver-streaked hair plowed back, his bristling beetle eyebrows hovering, both imposing and humorous, over the iron jaw of a comix hero. For a moment he held her left hand between both his hands.

Amanda had her dad's tough, square-ended her. fingers—guitar-playing fingers, some guy once told her.

"I don't think that's true, darling." He sounded like an old New Angeles newscaster who'd given one too many phony weather reports: desperate irritable, pathetic.

"Well, practically all week," said Amanda, softening.

"It's the new account, dear, is all." He didn't need to add, it hasn't been the same since your mother. And what was the term for it anyway? "Passed away" sounded too old school, too facile, too ephemeral. Committed suicide: too judgmental. She had made her choice. They both knew that.

Even after five years, the loss still hung in the air between father and daughter. As it hung on the house furniture, in the garden, in the secret places to which they'd consigned memory. No getting away from it.

"Maybe you can help me out, kiddo. You're a teen girl, right?"

Amanda laughed. "The last time I checked anyway, yeah I am, Dad."

"Good. So you're a perfect demographic for this thing I'm working on." He waved at the air above his desk. A vapor screen materialized. Tiny beads of water swirled towards a molecular vortex, spirit vapors on the loose.

On the screen, a holovid of a whitewater canyon appeared, complete with screaming girls clinging to the sides of a yellow raft.

Fractal glitch. Your set will realign itself. It is not necessary to actually do anything to experience the benefits of living in a free country.

Just, well, be free!

"Voila: a little thing we like to call Moon Camp."

Amanda sniffed trouble. Smells like Elektra Complex, she thought with the forefinger of a Prevac Madonna.

"Moon Camp?" she asked, a sardonic lilt twisting the syllables into something sinister. But this was a game they played, had since she was a little kid. The name of the game was Conviction and Doubt. He tried to sell her something; she gave him reasons why the product wouldn't work. Then it was her turn again.

Cartwright caught that look—the Doubt look—flashing in his daughter's crystal gray eyes.

"Uh huh. Moon Camp is a virtoreal environment being built on Elysium, the moon. It's a, how shall I word it? Basically a reform school for delinquent girls. Naturally, we're being asked to sell it as something completely different. Which is where your dad, that would be me, comes in. And Mr Bordeaux."

"Whoa, okay, hold it right there. Daddy."

"Mandy."

"A virtoreal environment? What in Spongebob's name is that anyway?"

"I guess you could call it an experiment. It's a montage of a virtual environment, meaning the usual—bucky balls and whatnot—spliced together with some utility fog, meshed with an actual terraformed structure in a biodome."

"I get it. I get it, Dad. You're a wacky Disneyfied father and such, tinkering in the basement, blowing shit up. But how is Bordeaux involved?"

"I can't really, I can't, Amanda."

He'd used her full name. This was serious.

Amanda nodded. She was forcing herself to frown, but it was rough going. Her mouth muscles kept snapping back into a grin.

"I can't tell you that right now. I mean, nobody is supposed to know that. It's totally sub-rosa, okay? Okay?"

Amanda turned her head away for a moment.

"Do you trust me?"

Amanda really frowned this time. Looked back at her dad. Melted. Emotionally, that is.

"Oh please darling, don't give me that face!"

Amanda let go. A brief smile. "Okay, Dad, I won't give you The Look. Let's just say you owe me one, okay?"

"Okay, darling." Cartwright kissed her on the cheek. "I have to do some more work, all right? So shoo with you. And don't worry!"

"I'll try not to," said Amanda.

\*\*\*

"Founders of ersatz leper colonies," read the open E-book. But no. What it actually said was:

"Parasites glomming on to obscure life forms. Sacred bearers of the Chomsky hash."

The text droned on, an old junkie on the nod, talking ceaselessly into a pair of newly abandoned cowboy boots. But enough history lessons; Amanda closed the book.

Doublelocked it. Put on the special black safety cache. By Narcociste, naturally. Ugh.

2:30am in the fog, wearing her favorite pajamas, twisting her hair into grotesquely abstract dreads. Her feet curled over the windowsill, the laptop resting comfortably on her knees. Fuming at the download from the PIS server that the Supranet had just disgorged on her laptop like some sinister vomitus.

It just wasn't adding up. Something was wrong, and it wasn't just the numbers. On paper, the project looked perfect. Having seen around the edges of countless projects foisted on youth for their ostensible betterment, Amanda had grown to appreciate some of the finer points of what a man named Noam Chomsky once termed "manufacturing consent".

In some ways she was already an adult, grown beyond cynical, staring down at her peers from a technocratic Olympus. She felt that cynicism like a block of ice that pressed against her optic nerves, a cool liquid, poured sizzling on the rising sap of hormones and boy craziness. This morning, the ice was growing its own subcontinent.

Crystals were ramping up, prepared for takeoff. Incarnate god formations, stalagmites and stalactites, a sizzle on the neural griddle. Moon Camp. It reminded her of something. But what?

The question kept bugging her, pulsing at the back of her brain, like a pustule or an obscure tic. It was a thing of evil. Consider all those game scenarios. Especially the VirchHock games. The ones where Jason Voorhees, the masked maniac, hunts down misbehaving teen girls. Depending on a player's mood, she got to be Jason; alternatively, she got to be the misbehaving bitch. Either way you looked at it, it was a thrillride.

It made Amanda feel oh, so blonde. As always, Voorhees was literally unstoppable. Every time you loaded up the game, there he was (Mr Personality), machete poised, ready for some slaying action.

Jason wasn't arbitrary about his victims. He was, in fact, very specific. He chose them from camps. Summer camps.

Fun places for girls to grow". Places he turned—not without some measure of art—into death camps. Jason was an architect of ruins. What he found (fresh and growing), he blasted. Jason had found a new earth. New heavens.

And new rock stars.

Amanda unfolded her vircher headset, jacked into the matrix. Prepared to see some stars her own damn self. If the Teknopriests didn't lurk somewhere inside this maze, Amanda was prepared to swallow an entire box of God Hammer condoms.

Jelly included.

Moon Camp smelled like Teknopriest. But honey, it positively reeked of berserk AI.

A game system run amok under the guidance of berserk Als was nothing she hadn't seen before. The only question was, did Moon Camp fit within this category? Or was the concept of Moon Camp Americana itself too blatantly exploitative, too reeking of teen spirit, to be easily explained away by an ordinary, albeit rational, hypothesis?

What the hell was going on up there? What were they building? And why?

Amanda felt her neck for crusty buildup. The eructation had subsided by a few micro-millimeters. Well, that was good enough for rock and roll.

Or Moon Camp—whichever came first.

\*\*\*

The flycar was sleek, a dagger of blue-flecked black chrome draped in Prevac gloss; tailfins right out of Golden Age Science Fiction, or a 1950s Chrysler; a snout like a rocketship. Even a dorsal fin that jutted from the hatchback

It was a beauty. It drove like your momma wanted to, but couldn't commit. Weatherproof, fireproof and, most importantly, hackproof. Unless you happened to be the daughter of Senator Douglas Carlson. In which case, your purse contained a single military-spec smartcard that could slice through the thickest firewall like a hot knife through butter.

"We are so mobile," April exulted, spinning like a fairy princess in a music box. Katie St Pierre, Clarissa Boron and Wendy Wainer scrambled over the top of their own abandoned flycar, which lay on its side, dug into somebody's immaculately kept garden.

Sensors in the hedges snapped, gnashed their teeth—rabid dogs—but failed to uplink to police channels. A simple matter of drugging the hedges with plant format Liquex. The girls had that angle covered.

April pulled a sleek cylinder from her bulletbelt, aimed it—zzap—at the jacked vehicle.

The hatchback, side doors slid open and April popped into the driver's seat.

The fact that she was the only girl in the group who lacked a license made the cushioned seats even more comfortable, to her already supremely pampered posterior. She eased her spine against the shit. Made love to it. It was built for love, for her machine-tooled haunches.

"Rock hard, ride free," she sang in the words of Prevac metal pioneers Judas Priest. The flycar hummed to life. It knew who was riding it. Oh. Yeah. Steering with her elbows as she flamed up a joint, April launched the vehicle in a straight vertical jump. They hung there momentarily, a wobbly hummingbird.

"Where to?"

"Just get us out of this clave," said Wendy from somewhere in the back seats. "Take the Tri-Level."

"Said than done."

The Tri-Level was an inter-animated freeway system soaring over the New Rose City Metrocomplex. On baroque lines of straight-aways, old-fashioned gravity bounder cars flashed by in serial formation. Newer models, hybridized beyond the surly bonds of earth, shot skyward with a slight lean on the wheel.

Some crawled the concrete walls, sparking and flashing green neon smears. Shadowlight reflections of passing flycars rippled across broad black mirrors. Someone was always watching. That doesn't mean they were always paying attention.

April took them higher, higher, where the air was thinner, the boys better accessorized. Cops were easier to spot. High above the fractionated crescent where New Rose City disintegrated into its neighbors over the virtual mountain to Candyland.

Signs reading "New Hollywoodland" blinked on and off in the vapor. The familiar towers of Chateau Moment crusted in the periphery of the flycar's viewscreen like ice crystals. Old school decadence meets new school technology.

Sleek iridescent statues of Prevac screen gods and goddesses ascended through a rich coffee-colored layer of murk. John Wayne smiled and twirled his lasso around a cringing Injun. Charlie Chaplin's bowler hat spun fast as a shark in a centrifuge, whipping up a plate of subatomic glitter.

John Rambo stood head and shoulders above his neighbors, aiming his monolithic weapon at all comers. On the half-hour, nanotech swarms called Utility Fog recreated the landscape. Robots, juiced on the Blue Flame, recreated these recreations on the quarter hour. *Res ipsa loquitur.*

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The streets belonged to the speed tribes. Gangs of kids illuminated by internal pharmacies, the tribes ran ragged along fringes of the

massive metallic feeder tubes, postindustrial pipes snapping up visitors from outside claves.

Stabbing stroboscopic lightfingers from copcars, smeared from fractally-composite identities, lit up the tribes' digitally enhanced optics like a Christmas tree raised on the Mandelbrot juice.

They churned within, these kids, nursing inchoate desires: for blood, for food, for violent ends and hyperviolent means. But mostly for information, critical feedback.

The datastream arriving from New Rose City looked particularly sharp tonight. Hot bauds in tight nanopore. Zipped chicks in partywear. Girls on biofilm.

"Damn that looks good," said Oscar "El Chronico" Hernandez, a twenty-five year-old anarchotechnopunk, green wetware hair extensions dripping down his carefully etched face. Crusty eruptions from a neurosense tattoo poured down his right cheekbone, gene stippling and plasma ripples dictated by the beat and political judgment Callo of Godstilldead. (The band.)

Omar poured an exploratory hand down his tight micropore jeans and fondled himself.

On cue, "Peace is Pussy" wrote itself on his left cheek in flaming neon cryptoglyphics.

"Damn." He spat on the sidewalk. The saliva steamed like alien blood. Or so it looked from where he was.

"Whoohoo!" yelled Oscar at the air, at no one in particular.

Behind the cocktail, Oscar's past, present and future congealed like a lump of jelly. Tonight that cocktail was composed of synthesized rat parts, harmaline, essence of coca plant, DMT of course, and a near-paralyzing timed-release supply of LQ.

Reality twittered in and out, his friends becoming fuzzy blobs at stochastic increments, furry beasts the next. And the elves were closing in, the little mechanical swine. Like driving a flycar on the Hyperbahn in NeoSalzburg. Only that flycar was his brain. And the motor speedway was consensual reality. He smiled.

The girls in the sky rode a storm cloud: dark angels with wet, blinking insect wings.

To Oscar, the jacked flycar looked a lot like a flying manta ray. He bowed before the descending god. "Let's go!" screamed April as she leaned on the wheel. "Brace for the G's!" The flycar took a sharp, oblique to the pavement; a shower of sparks rainbowed across the ruts. Leaden pockets of water doused the electric microburst.

Oscar careened into his tribe. His homies disappeared in a spray of fractal mist, reconstructed behind him, where the air was suddenly cleaner. Fractal dust from their half-naked bodies glittered in the dark. Oscar patted himself down. He wasn't virtual tonight, lurking mode or otherwise. The top hat; now that was another story.

"Damn," he said again. "You're killing me here ladies!" He gallantly swept the pavement with his top hat. The top hat, used once, disappeared. Omar's implants tingled.

High above the city, Fred Astaire nodded approval. The man still had style and grace. He knew about the chicas. The rucas. The girls on biofilm.

Oscar nodded back. Skimming a thin cushion of air, the flycar hovered over the intersection.

"See you guys, I've got a hot date!" Wendy scissored out long fishnets and bailed from the car.

"Hey, Wendy. How're we going to pick you up?" April yelled.

The flycar zigzagged behind her inexpert touch. Automatic governors cut in to steady the machine. Hum of expensive static.

"I'll buzz you, okay?" replied Wendy. And to Oscar: "Hello sugar."

"Que tal, ruca," said Omar, a broad grin splitting his face. Wendy took his hand and descended to the pavement. The pair dissolved in whorls of liquid darkness.

\*\*\*

"So what now?" April asked. "Do we just fly around? Do we catch a show? Get some tincture? Catch some cybersplat?"

"Clubs!" yelled Katie and Clarissa together. Giggling, jumping up and down in their seats like kids after candy.

Clubs it was: a clockwork mathematics defining steps in an assembly line; an evening's itinerary for the girls from New Rose

City.

First stop, Fly Bar.

At Fly Bar, they never checked ID's. It wasn't like NeoVegas and the Ecto Bar, which was a smarmy, commercial venture touting a lot of the same goods and services.

Didn't matter. Smart enough to seek it out, smart enough to find it? You were ready for Fly Bar, no matter what your chronological age. The girls went there first. Fly Bar responded to a pulse beam, a kind of electronic password.

April had that from Verlaine, among the cutest of the mall boys. He still wasn't getting any though; at least, not that she was aware of. At the corner of Melrosia and Neon Sunset, a six by six foot rectangular wedge opened in the asphalt. The flycar slid vertically down a long silver chute. As the girls plummeted to the basement, fake pineapples and cherries hung frozen in the air.

April reached out. Grabbed a double stem.

"Keep your hands in the car!" screamed Katie. "I swear, one of these days you're going to draw back a stump."

"Oh loosen up," April shot back. "And even if I did, I've got a GenTech reloader back at the house. What? Should take all of five seconds to get my arm back—besides, some guys like a little amputee action!"

"Fucking slut," said Katie, her collagen-grown lips grown suddenly unstable, smacking April on the back.

April smiled a mouthful of interlocking shark's teeth.

"Don't push the driver," she said sweetly. Gnash. A curlicue of silver sparks gathered around April's lips. Decayed just as quickly. Don't. Push. The driver.

When they reached the bottom, a pair of rubbery wet lips swallowed the flycar. In the underground parking garage, flycars slotted into stacks along multidimensional rolling grids.

As the vehicle slid to a jerky stop, a droid valet dressed as a 1990s Prevac club kid rolled in on skates, wearing a zebra-striped mattress on her head.

"That'll be five hundred credits, please," said the droid. April looked back at Katie and Clarissa. Katie and Clarissa shrugged their

shoulders, looked back at April . April made a face, dug out her dad's AllCard. "All right, all right. Just give me a second."

"Thank you," said the droid, sliding the card between her breasts, blue-black PVC jauntily detailing her nipples. "Here's your receipt."

She handed April a small blue octagon. "Please keep your token with you at all times."

April, Katie and Clarissa slid out from the car.

The droid frowned. "This is a hot car," she said.

April bluffed. Put on her I'm a stupid slut face.

"No shit it's a hot car!"

"This is a stolen vehicle. We cannot assume responsibility for hijacked flycars."

April looked at the girls. The girls shrugged. She turned back to the droid.

"There must be some mistake," said April in a deadly monotone.

The droid was programmed to look confused. "Pardon me, may I look at your registration please?"

April's AllCard contained the cloned registration for the car. "Um, I think you just downloaded my info. Just now? Does that, uh, compute?"

Everything was in order. Of course it was.

"I'm sorry, my mistake," said the droid, turning a courtesy shade of red. "Enjoy your visit, Ms Carlson."

"Fucking droids," muttered April. "Glorified toaster ovens."

Katie bristled. "Well some of them are all right." (Katie was currently dating an artificial person.) The droid scooted rapidly out of earshot, a vapid grin sealing over her face.

"I don't mean for sex; yeah, they're great to fuck, but—you know what I mean."

"I guess," said Katie warily. "Whatever. Drinks, girls?"

Arm in arm, the three sailed past the bouncer, a green fighter 'bot with pneumatic shoulders.

Freezing on a default, the 'bot saluted them. Sleek, chic and oblique, the girls sauntered down the glowing yellow vulva-shaped entrance to Fly Bar. Wetly, the lips smacked shut behind them.

\*\*\*

Robots tossed and lurched their way through the mist. Little by little, a golden pavilion was wrought from the skeletal remains of Prevac culture. Its pagodas of jade and ivory would appear to undermine the current theory regarding the origins of the lizard race.

April tapped her drink—a long slender vial of the Black Death. Reddish pustules boiled on the liquid surface. These she popped with a long silver fingernail, releasing a shower of toxic seed; the good stuff.

"And a beer back, please." DMT gremlins made with the busy look.

Clarissa and Katie stood against the bar. "I don't know," Katie yelled into Clarissa's ear.

"I'm a little worried about Wendy."

"I know. That's what's got me worried."

"Honey, that girl can take care of herself."

"Oh, right." Clarissa laughed. "Well relax, okay Katie? I mean, we all know you're hung up on that little fuckbot, but it's time to loosen up. And Wendy's a big girl. 'Sides, I think I've seen that guy around. He's okay."

"You're right, of course," said Katie. "What should I have, what should I have. Lessee. Clarissa, you, me, Blue Death?"

Clarissa nodded.

"Two Blue Deaths," Katie said to the spectral bartender, who fizzled out in a series of incandescent streaks. The drinks constructed themselves intact on the bar counter: two gleaming vials of pale blue fluid.

"And I'd like to start a tab."

"Do we have your data?" asked a disembodied voice from behind the bar.

The bartender partially materialized: a pair of skeletal hands.

"Yeah, it's on April Carlson. Oh, April," Clarissa waved. April was talking to some cool hacker geek.

He was leading her out to the dance floor, where sparkling pieces of smart mosaic tile needled out obscene messages in Arabic.

"Oh, April!" she frantically mimed. "Can I use your card?"

April put her thumb and forefinger together, turned, and met her prince.

A shower of pink crystal descended on the dance floor, weaving their kiss into the stuff of dreams. A slick rhythm started up behind the bandstand. The beat was hot, pulsing, cherry-popping zootsuit swing. With a little acid in it. Just a taste. A microdot punched onto a silicon chip.

"Ohmigod," said Clarissa. "It's Godstilldead."

"Yeah it is," said Katie. "Lovin' it!"

The girls clicked their drinks together.

"Let's get nasty," Katie said.

There was a hum of white noise.

Clarissa said, "Wait. I can't feel my toes!"

Katie had an evil smile. "Like I said, nasty. And Godstilldead. By the way, I can't feel my fucking fingers."

"Who said that," slurred Clarissa. "Nietzsche?"

"Groucho Marx, I think."

"Oh yeah," said Clarissa, caroming off Katie. "Groucho fuckin' Marx. I always loved that guy. Hel-lo."

"My God, you are so wasted," Katie said.

"Yeah, and you're not far behind, little miss goody two shoes!"

Clarissa wrapped a glitter-striped pole with her left leg.

Lights from the disco ball splintered over her fishnets. "Two shoes!"

Behind the insistent pulse from the noise DJ, the girls erupted in gales of helpless laughter. They raised their glasses to the guy in the DJ booth. The noise DJ, who wore a silver spacesuit, flipped them the finger.

"Rude!" they both cried. Laughed. Skulls crashed together.

There was a lightning zigzag *crack*. Then ugly premonitions of neural microsurgery.

\*\*\*

An hour later, Katie and Clarissa awoke in a daze. A butt-naked, tender white skin striped with what looked an awful lot like fresh

marks from a crop whip daze. And a painful sensation in every orifice. Even their brains felt violated.

Their gazes met.

"Uh oh," Katie and Clarissa groaned. And smiled. A mirror smile of utter horror. The horror of violated beauties.

"Is it possible?" began Clarissa. Katie placed a finger on her lips.

"No honey. Don't."

An hour later, Katie and Clarissa awoke in another daze. A butt-naked, tender white skin peppered with tiny red dots daze; a horrible realization that the party is over daze. Their brains, especially, felt violated. Their gazes met.

"Is it possible?" began Katie.

Clarissa placed a finger to her lips. "Let's just see if we can find the car and get the fuck home."

Katie sat up. Examined a strand of puke-slathered hair. Realized she had nothing to wash her hands with. Groaned.

"Why couldn't it have been a little less pure?" she whined. "A little less pure. Why?"

"I know, I know," said Clarissa. "Shit, girl, you're freaking me out with that bullshit. Still, it's the only way to motherfuckin' fly. Speaking of which, how are we going to find Wendy?"

"Oh shit, I almost forgot!"

"Yuppers. Here." She extended a wan arm.

"Now don't slip in that vomit, doll."

The girls stood up on escalators of melting sludge.

Checked out their present environment. Fingers of cerise-shaded morning light stabbed through holes in something. Like a giant, dirty, wet cardboard box.

"Where the hell are we?" asked Clarissa.

"Shit if I know," said Katie.

"You're helpful."

"Fuck you! I don't see you having the least clue."

"Smells like a wet cardboard box!"

"Yeah. Looks it. Oh my God! What is this, like, some kind of wet cardboard city? How did we get here? What were we doing? What were you doing? Clarissa?"

"Clarissa?"

"Sorry," said Clarissa. "I'll never do it again. Pinkie swear?"

The girls linked pinkies. Clicked heels once, twice. Remained stuck in the same stupid position.

"Oh my God!" Clarissa squealed. Katie mouthed the words back in silent horror.

"Oh. My. God." They squealed together. And shattered like the spun glass of dreams.

\*\*\*

The Hollywoodland Police got the alert early. They just sat on it. New Rose City girls in trouble. News at eleven. The clave: powerful, knit into the matrix. Heavy political clout. Unless local Tribes were involved, HP never liked to look under the hood. Figuratively. Literally. Whatever.

This time, though, it was different. When Sergeant Judy Butler took the call from her desk, she was powerfully zoned out on the Mandelbrot. Butler had lived in New Rose City; she knew the turf.

She also knew the powerful politics involved. Which is why her initial instinct told her: Shelve the call, lady.

That's right, shelve it. Send it back to the phonies in upper management. The bullshit quarter, they called it. Where the men in bad suits walked back and forth, back and forth, arguing in prolix, generalized terms.

Butler didn't want any worries. She didn't need any hassles.

So the girls had a little fun. Left a little scorched earth. Woke up in a wet cardboard box. Hell, woke up in a city of wet cardboard boxes. That was par.

Who hadn't been there, done that? When she was their age, Butler had seen her share of parties. And boxes. Sometimes they were made of cardboard, but other times... The horror.

Those times were part of who she was, who she wanted to be: a cop who knew the difference between actual criminals and humans out for fun. I mean, come on: out for fun? Got a problem with fun?

A cop who distinguished between right and wrong along finer gradients than were standard for the NAR. Butler pulled up Sade Plant. A delicate maneuver, at the best of times. In the depths of her secret life, Plant craved beauty rest. She liked her beauty rest a whole lot. A whole fucking lot more than she liked being involved in New Rose politics.

"Honey," she'd say to whichever ear she could capture. "Honey, it may say New Rose on the sign, but that town stinks like shit. Okay?"

But it was going to have to be that way. As angry as Plant could get, she was also the best friend Butler ever had in a storm. Sometimes, the two secretly collaborated under assumed names, like Donna Q Horowitz.

But neither had ever been known to wear a bad suit. In public, anyway.

"What's up?" the profoundly dissatisfied vox echoed on the other end.

"What's up? It's Judith."

"Judith. Judith? What in Bob's name are you doing calling me out of my peaceful rest, especially at this time?" The word echoed according to some perpetual Puritan logic. Became lost in Spongebob knows what solar system.

"Lord knows I've done you enough favors. You should be thankful next time I see you I don't whup your white girl ass."

Butler gave a secretive Zen smile, that of a cyborg in training.

Beyond Plant's ire, the faintest twinkle of humor kindled to a blaze. Just enough of a flame for Butler to get a light herself.

"Listen, you know if it wasn't urgent I wouldn't be calling you. But something smells funny about this."

"Yeah it smells funny! It smells like your white girl ass!"

"Seriously though. For a second. You know the New Rose clave?"

"Hell, darlin', I built the New Rose clave from the ground up. I seasoned that shit with my own blood, sweat and tears. Don't you be tellin' me about no New Rose. Honey, New Rose smells just like the old rose, only not as sweet."

"Well, and I don't know how they did it, but somehow these girls carved a passage through one of the orbital metaports."

"Okay."

"Apparently they went in via the Tri-City Metroplex."

"You don't say."

"Well I'm not just talking to exercise my jaw here, Sade.

"So you'll come in?"

"Sister, I never thought you'd ask."

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"This is Hollywoodland PD. Please bring your vehicle to a complete stop and exit the flycar. You will not be asked again."

Katie craned her neck back.

Menacingly, she said, "We are not fucking around."

Wendy was still asleep. Katie tapped April on the shoulder.

"What, you freakin' nitwit? Can't a girl drive without being lasertagged every goddamn nanosecond?"

"April, it's five oh. Hurry it up, chica! Walka-ley. Cha cha!"

"Five what? Dudette, it's not even midmorning yet. What the fuck have you been smoking?"

Katie yelled in April's ear: "PD!"

"Oh man, you are going to get it. You are so going to get it."

"That is not even funny. You know I don't even have a license."

"Oh. And we're flying a jacked 'car."

"So how deep in shit are we this time?"

Katie threw up her hands. "Pretty fucking deep, girl."

"Huh?"

"This wide?"

"Eh?"

"As wide as Shiva's fucking eye!"

\*\*\*

(New Rose City, NAR): Nanobot army invades parents meeting.

Read the headline.

Senator Toby Carlson looked as deeply uncomfortable as a white man can get. Which is why Sabrina Carlson had brought out the expensive china. And the flowers. And the Jackson Pollacks. And a

little Utility Fog, to sweeten the mix. The parents were assembled in the living room, which morphed subtly every half-hour into Kubla Khan's pleasure dome (caves of ice, optional).

Outside, beyond the fenced-in patio with its garden, waves of the NeoPacific strolled restlessly. The surf was high today. With varying degrees of success, most of the parents strove to emulate the surf's providential state.

Inside, Senator Carlson checked his watch. About three minutes ahead of schedule: so far, so good.

"I'm just waiting a few minutes so that everybody gets comfortable, has some drinks. Have you seen the new garden?"

Wendy's dad, Karl Wainer, nursed an incipient foul mood.

"Senator, I realize that you're just trying to be civil and put us at ease. But what you're doing is cranking my nerves pretty tight. Why don't you at least sit down?"

He felt like a dad on some ancient Prevac sitcom. The ones in which they chopped up family members, flies for the gods' sport, à la certain depraved Italian horror shows.

Sabrina scurried in.

"Liquid vigor, anyone?" Amanda's dad, a study in contrast, was happy with drinks. Genial with happy drinks. Happy.

Despite endless rounds of gene therapy, Mr Cartwright was getting rather pudgy.

"S'good," he said, lifting a vodka martini from the proffered selection. "Very good."

"Well, I suppose it's time to begin. We're going to talk about something today that I know all of us have been dreading. I myself have not been looking forward to this moment."

Carlson cleared his throat.

Mr Wainer made the still classic "wind it up" motion with his wrist. Which strongly resembled the familiar "tie me up" motion popularized by books and films such as *The Story of O* by Pauline Reage; not to mention Pedro Almodovar's timeless classic, *iAtame!*

"Okay, I'm not going to ask anybody if they need their drinks freshened. Mr Cartwright is welcome to the no-host bar, by the way. We're also serving tinctures."

"Cheers," said Mr Cartwright.

Happy. Amiable. (Blazed out of his fucking gourd.)

"Enough preamble. Ahem. Last Saturday our children were involved in an altercation with police in Melrosia. It's very fortunate that nobody was hurt. Very fortunate."

The Senator paused to tug at his tie, glazed with a fractal dust compositing random masterworks of the 20th Century avant-slash-garde.

Mrs Laroque raised her hand. "All the way to Moon Camp?" Her voice had an edge of rising hysteria to it.

"How prescient of you. Yes, Mrs Laroque. Thanks for breaking the ice. So to speak. Ahem."

From the corner of his eye, the Senator saw something small and green, move rapidly across the bar, followed by a stream of equally small, verdant citizens. Invoking the legacy of inscrutable Chinese wisdom, he carefully chose to ignore this information.

"As many of you know, and some of you are actually involved with at the design level, we've been working on an experiment. Moon Camp.

"Moon Camp Americana poses, I believe, the solution to many of the problems we've been having with our children." He cleared his throat, pointed to the wall. The vaporous drift of a drop down holoscreen floated in front of gray stucco whorls. Between the Senator's feet, a caravan of pint-sized tanks rode swiftly across the carpet, flashing toothpick flames from pinprick-sized barrels.

Again, he chose (valiantly) to ignore.

"Swimming, horseback riding, learning skills: these are just some of the benefits of Moon Camp. I hate to sound like a salesman, but I'm a bit partial to some of these activities myself. He-he."

He could smell something burning. Most likely, carpet. A nervous laugh. (His own.)

A fat silence echoed and redoubled the Senator's nanosecond of private misery. What were those goddamn things, anyway, he asked himself in a miserable state of panic? He felt like President Richard Nixon in the last days of the empire.

And why couldn't he just sweep them under the rug, like so many other inconveniences from times past?

"In one week, our children will be enjoying an all expenses paid vacation on Moon Camp. The benefits are, I think, fairly obvious."

"Yeah, get them out of our hair," said Wainer.

"I admit, I'm going to miss my April," said Senator Carlson. "Very much. Ahem."

"But the thing is, we have to be strong about this. Kind of bite the bullet." He hated the metaphor, using it advisedly. "Not to be too obvious about it, but elections are coming up. And for those of us in the Beltway, this is a very important time. A very decisive time."

"Spare us the political bullshit—I mean rhetoric," said Wainer.

"I think it's a splendid idea. How about it?"

Mr Cartwright slurped his third martini. "I'll drink to that."

"I'm sure you will. I'm feeling a little thirsty myself."

Bobby was going to get a little talking to later. Okay, a lot of talking to. Bobby wasn't staying up late to watch the drift from Uranus. Not tonight, anyway.

# FOUR

From an early age, Armando Castillo had felt the nip of the science bug. But once he'd stumbled over a reference to Dr Wimmer in a volume on science history, his fate was sealed. Shrink-wrapped. Delivered to the future on a sterilized platter.

From that moment, Castillo consecrated a place in his heart to the man he called "the Great One." While other boys chose heroes from the mainstream repertoire—virtual hockey players, cybersplatter stars, hackers and lighter-than-air racers—young Armando venerated the man who wanted Jason Voorhees "soft".

Aloysius Bartholomew Wimmer didn't live to make his greatest contribution to science, but the fact that he died in the attempt made him a kind of martyr to the cause—a cause of which he was the shining and sole exemplar. Nevertheless, with all the subsequent discoveries in microbiology and the shiny new tools made possible by nanotech, nobody dared follow in Wimmer's footsteps. In fact, many still considered Wimmer's wish to penetrate the mysteries of cellular regeneration as foolhardy as Faust's challenge to God had struck a previous era.

The 25th Century might contain means to extend life far beyond reasonable expectations, but it still had no cure for death. The Teknopriests considered such an end blasphemous, even if it could be achieved. And they were the ones doling out the fat contracts.

Still, like all societies, the Teknopriesthood had its dissenters. A new crop had emerged, one that still hungered for conventional morals, yet felt that science itself shouldn't be hampered by such scruples. This splinter group was making itself known to powerful interests.

Besides, Jason Voorhees was just too valuable a test subject to let lie fallow. Even if he couldn't be left to rot. When the true nature of Project Jason was unveiled the development of an indestructible superkiller, a soldier who shrugged off plasma bullets and met severe bodily trauma with a quizzical twist of the head—the Priesthood gave

the government their fullest blessings. Defeating Death was something only God could do.

But ramming it down the enemy's throat? That was only proper.

When it came to choosing a team leader, there was no question about it. Dr Castillo had the full qualifications necessary to extract Jason's secrets. When he got the news, Castillo knew that all the years of sacrifice and toil had been worth it. It wasn't good for a man of science to work under primitive conditions, hounded like an animal, plagued by teams of ninjas and black ops, subject to whimsical fatwas, routed out from one jungle fortification to another.

There was something soul killing about that work, the long hours standing knee deep in human viscera. Trying to get a purchase on some anonymous native's eyeball. Desperate to make it happen. If you were in it just for the cheap thrills, perhaps this would do, but Castillo had a higher calling.

In his darkest hour, when even his nurse assistant had become overwhelmed with nausea at the atrocities she had witnessed and retreated to a corner of the lab in a catatonic stupor, Castillo questioned his course of action.

Was this the life he had dreamed of? This fugitive industry, surrounded by blackened corpses and crawling mold, nearly deafened by the cries of mothers, the vengeful curses of wives and husbands sundered from their loved ones by Castillo's mercenaries?

"Ay, Madre de Dios, ayudame!"

The only thing that sustained him on that bleak night, and the many to come, was the thought of Dr Wimmer. No, the Great One had not died in vain, not while Castillo breathed. Even if he had to choke down a lot of toxins in the meantime. For a moment, he felt a lot like the sinister Mr Nixon himself.

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Extract from *An Imaginary Book of Jasonania*

—by Pierre Menard (co-author of *Extreme Quixote for Interstellar Tourists*).

"It has been said, with a great deal of qualified affection, that Jason is a menace. A threat. A virus. A foreign intruder of some kind. Well, we are all foreigners. Nobody is *not* a foreigner. Think about it. You're the virus. Be it. Transmit it. You carry the codes. You know the trajectory. Let it. Let it invade your subconscious. Fill out your dreams. Invading the dreams of countless children with insidious messages. Perpetuating the meme-based mass rape of our forebrains by mutants. Sweeping away the surface muck. Like him.

Like Jason Voorhees.

Sweeping with an abject and cruel hand the carefully accumulated crust of data, without which Jasonania would become a mere curiosity, a hotlink without a referent. And so? What if he were all of these? A book of memories? An encyclopedia of deadly ideas? A figure not to be repeated? Lies, and damn lies? It all became clear to a young man named Benicio Torres as he sat baking under a hot larval sun, smoking the green Ajax, listening to the hum of cicadas evolved from a mutant alien strain. Liquid planets melted into his eyes. Were they all just goddamn fools? Didn't they know any better?

Sitting there, spread open, like a book of memories. One of them.

*The Books of Shatter.* An encyclopedic survey of every dark anomaly known to instellar civilization. From the Bell Witch to the Hexenhaus Massacres. A last beacon house of sanity. While the nights of the red death raged outside. The last starburst in the eyes of an old necrophile. Benicio Torres had been on many expeditions to the First Earth. His first assignment was simple: to tabulate the damage. Where everything had gone wrong. Where, against a steadily rising index of appalling earth changes directly attributable to toxic waste, the inhabitants of the garden planet let the corporations fuck it all up. That's right. They stood by, patiently, for global giants to bitchslap the globe.

Is that how you treat your mother? Subsequently, Torres was sent to the Planet of Prevac Data, inhabited mainly by robot drones and short men with archaic, hooked spectacles. They called them the Pilgrims.

Torres was skeptical. What was so great about this planet of origins? Why did they cling to their mother so, especially as they had

destroyed her? Gutted her? Taken her intestines for highways and her womb for oil? Was it guilt? Some atavistic tug at the heart compelling them beyond their selfish hives? Their clinical, icy domains? Torres wondered sometimes if it wouldn't be better for all concerned if someone were to nuke that puppy.

With him on it.

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Extract from *The Books of Shatter, or, A Meditation on the Moon Camp Massacre*,  
—by Jonas Frosty.

"But that would come later. She's animated, lacerated, laminated, lit from inside like a pumpkin queen. Harnessed Venus just another pro honey oiled and suctioned, lubed and laced. Many more where you came from, "sweetheart." One more pony in the rodeo.

It was clear by now to all areolas apparent that nobody was in the mood to count the iridescent hues of rainbows. They were here to fuck. Sin lurked indisputably behind the slightest nervous twitch. Subliminal serpents slurped daquiris in the parlor's jungle glades. Suddenly hot n' smokin' pariahs were oozing out of hidden nooks and crannies in the shrubbery. Entire units of blue-eyed cowboys and sybarites of the James Dean cult crawled on polymorphing limbs to the crevices, cunts and crooked limbs jammed in their astounded faces.

In the naugahyde seraglio formerly referred to as "the den", lubricated hustlers of every description snatched eagerly at fluffs of popcorn and cotton candy tossed to gaping lips, as they built the cybernetic shrine to Elsa Lancaster. Even jaded veterans of postapocalyptic braggadocio wars—my mutation is bigger than your teensy chromosomal nick—lashed lascivious tongues to the mast in preparation for storm to come.

Meanwhile, back at the haunted castle, the caretaker formerly known as Igor renounces his trade in the abased brain business and takes to smuggling the pineal glands of certain rare species of

hermaphrodite found only in South American jungle settings. Lurching forward on his one good leg, dragging that decrepit piece of meat idly forward stick pins in it it's useless, slyly watching for the moment when Master drops his guard.

Igor plumps down the pineal glands in a big vat sizzles 'em with acid, fries 'em up something fierce and serves the gland up red-hot.

Nervous first-timers experience telepathic oneness with disincarnate con men. Lubricious tune-ups with interstellar KY expose them to lewd comments and alien probing. Wrapped in perennial mummy bandages, Elsa Lancaster cuts together an acting job not yet equaled, in the live trade anyway..."

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Robot cameras cycle and recycle the same lights and spectacle. Melting contrapuntal algorithms rewind heads like tapeworms. Revved-up biofilms, ready to party: bring it on.

In his unfinished final novel *The Last Tycoon*, F Scott Fitzgerald says that's the whole proposition: movies. Alpha, omega, all points covered. So here they are again, digging it up like it's the Garden of Eden, spades clanking on Eve's clavicle, dull smacks on Adam's hipbone, sundered black earth everywhere.

"Any questions so far? No. You with the hat, you can sit down. All right. Places, everyone. Places."

Roger Bordeaux wrings his hands with insane hunger. "We're making a real pornflick here, people, yummy and quick. True, we use rubbery flesh, but we've got authentic values. The taut pink tip of the nipple—so close you could touch it. Those polymers—so fresh they squeak. Those wet dreams? They were mine once, maybe still are. Hot spotlights, Vaseline lens, body creams and color fields forever. Those lights... And hey, did I tell you about the gaffer? He's hung like a stallion, ready for love. Not to mention the angel of Death—she's raring to shoot a scene or two, the scary skeleton bitch. Stars we got lined up, and we keep 'em coming. We rock the space between blinks, folks S'all we do.

"All in all, it's a stellar weld of cast and crew. Should be a huge hit. The crystal shit is being fuelled as we speak in tongues. Pardon me while I try one of these cigars here.

"What's the picture, you may ask. Well, it's a remake of an old Universal icon, a heroine of sorts. *The Bride of Frankenstein*, in Cinemascope! We belong dead; only this time, it's personal."

He smiles his best Ed Wood smile.

"Ah yes, let us pause now, rolling back on our haunches whilst ghastly waves of memory lurch to the surface. Boris Karloff, Elsa Lancaster. Green nausea, white terror, that electric shock of horror on her face while ghoulish lights played against her pale white flesh. Curses, rejection, the monster's despair. And a nice windmill. Nice tits too, when you think about it. (Never got to see those puppies, did ya? Well, now you do.)

"Meanwhile, your camera focus drills on me. I take it in. It makes me cum, darling. All that attention gets me hot. I dribble on your boom boom and swill champagne, my own little Hollywood babble-on. I am your swooning star (cumgargle), your fallen angel (easy on the wings, darlin'), your randy succubus (oh stop!) your cybernetic shrine to Elsa Lancaster! In my mummywrapped arms you will find all the secrets of love and death. Screw me, carouse with me, open your heart. Parenthetical aside—that is one organ I have never tasted. And I never drink... wine.

"Ease it open, let it down. Open. Let it down. Easy now.

"Slurp. Slurp. There's a good dogsbody. He-llo."

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Meanwhile, Back At the Castle... It's a long way from the laboratory. Piled up silk shoulders beside his ponderous steps. The monster belongs to the dead. At least it's a place to belong. Who, where, electric head, streaky sister?

White jets in the skull, again.

All these hot young lovers, they were me once too. I raise my glass in benediction and honor. To your health, godspeed. Get yours get some.

Because it's all true. If you'd wanted me, I lay somewhere else—spastic retching, gagged on cold, silver microballs. Decked out in nano-funeral drag. If you needed me, I lay frozen in unnatural geometry. Bent to take it, *bend* to take it. Cold ass quivers. Stray hairs, stone cold. Kneeling on tile to take it. Plunging bloodslick down whirling cylinders to get it. Packed like a bullet in hell's outer chambers, to make it. Infringe my rights, pack my wound, pack my bullet. Fuckblood, bloodfuck, make it, make it.

I can hear the mermaids swelling, inch by inch. Sea serpent's coming out any time, ladies and sorority sisters. One pauses on a redstocking knee, threads ground to wisps; curl of gluteal muscles, foreshortened sharp shock of mad muff... winkles of pink twilight. Rugmunch forceps ready. Hardon cake delivery. Whispers of blue blood.

Ready, captain.

Then, young guns throttle their engines wet ready willing. Corporate spies roll down like PVC spiders.

"Get 'em mace 'em throttle 'em, hands behind their backs, hands over their heads, arms between and around their thighs. No flesh will be spared. It's your turn next, Jimbo."

Her face is lit like a cybernetic shrine to Elsa Lancaster.

Choronzon silver, wrapped in mystique, these girls in their outsized Greek letters. Alpha oh my delta omichrome.

Full force perspective girlflesh goosepimples. High glare from cute calves. Spurting squealing out, ram home that preposterous load, sons of Zeus!

Bright-eyed Athena likes it stiff from a girl special. Nike swoosh thrills. Gagged on girljuice. Allgood, sellmesome, gimmesome. Sweet drops, unlock and reload.

"Can you get in further closeup, can you? Jam the mic in his fucking face." That mic's a fat snake menace.

"Lick. It. Up. All of it. All that juice..."

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The other pieces move; this one stands still. Pointing to the queen. You get it?

"Start," she commands. "White moves first." Starkers, she, the counselor of this camp city, commands that white.

Lipstick black smack.

Then, behind eternal marble thighs, white nights and license, temple prostitutes giggle in digital twilight. Rock and roll, my friends, my worms. Rock heartbreak nastiness, lace and leather. Imminent decay of proton coils. Dominance and heartbreak soup, allatonce pink. She spread pink spread, she said.

He moves. Just press jouer.

"You want hook up, sailor? You dream pie?"

Pussy hair tangle. (Nasty protein dream pie.)

Cringing taxidermists hit the skids, foul on all sorts of lousy dope and rigmarole. Elsa Lancaster said, "It's a long way from her house to the Bauhaus, and I've got decades of bad aesthetics waiting for offload!"

Pasolini daydream architecture caresses a river of black meat. Languid sybarites glide and glide.

"Bad animation can drag you all the way down," said Betty Boop as she vomited dark streams of the celluloid juice on the steps of the White House. "Don't try it, you'll get hooked, skewered on the junk. And you'll stay there, flapping yer wings for all eternity, while some kind of hick, ass-backwards gryphon sodomizes your ass."

That's telling 'em, Boopster. Why, with that kind of moxy and all-American knowhow, we'll be cream in your galaxy too!

Anesthetic snuffbox and her Frankenstein patronymic; yet, caressed and adored lady, patted and perfumed, who was she to call herself a daughter? What star spangled rights unfurled behind her, glorifying those American thighs? What lips, what names? What immortal hand-eye coordinate points? Where did they come from? And why were they bearing heads on trays like Salome in the age of black mass productions?

Spherical servitors from far away, their heads pointing back, their hearts pointing forward to... lubricious swirls. Don't look down.

Abbott's work was important, from the frat house to the White House to the deathhouse and Nexus searches in between important. That was no lie. Meanwhile, down in the basement, subaltern weasels got you every time. And they said that freedom was free... The hoodlums.

Diaphragm, thighs; fearful cemetery, ain't it? Abbott scoured all databases, all trak lines. No news was good news unless it was the groundlings.

That very evening, Messieurs discovered the intrigue involving Augustine and one of the subaltern fuckers. (It didn't make them jump, but the teeth were viral. Zap. Twitch. Egads, she was sputtering green pluck like them Venusians! Trauma ward, away! No lie. Like a patient, anesthetized on a table... Well, anyway we had to suture the girl and remap those coordinate points. Girl got a bad attitude. Synthetic DNA right there. Build 'em up, tweak out the water, pile on the protein, and you've got yourself a golden one, son. Subway routes rammed down her throat, the old in-out hotbox snuff-channel.)

Twerks, caps, snipper?

She was good, better than anybody he had known. But he didn't know that. The minister's hands lifted him then pushed him deeper under Deeper than black tie dreams, senator. We'll make a man out of you yet. Don't forget to breathe deep.

God speaks to children also in dreams, and by the oracles that lurk in darkness. Sometimes, however, the spiritual arousal is too acute. It's a perilous, Mithraitic flux between darkness and a world of hurt (word to the wise—the hurt usually wins). The minister removes his black veil, revealing a cold void of spermscapes. Tailteaser figure eights. Conduits of berserk DNA.

He snuffled at the breech box, wringing and flaying his hands for a little benediction.

She spat on him. "Spiritual arousal?" she cried. "You monster. You and your hideous, creeping Zen enzymes! You effluvium of recycled sutras! You Tantric insect!"

There was a bird, a skeletal monster, a clatter and blink of diodes and dots. She loved it, and it loved her. Why, Henry? Because of that

old Paracelsus jazz, no doubt. And anyway, if the bird could take it, so could he.

She said the data was perfect. But the chick was mad. Moi-meme, I'd almost forgotten Dr Gilbert's appointment. "His help," father groaned. "His help will kill you."

Those eyes, the logocentric spiral of them. Those bedroom eyes. Unusual lab work in protoplasmic cell suspension. The terminology is highly specialized. And "it's a long way from the laboratory," said Elsa Lancaster in a blue silk gown trailing down the cockleshell Spanish moss walkway with her beau on her arm, trailing sighs and secrets, neurons and nevermores.

Fractal mores and deliquescent enzymes. Lolling-around microparticles: "Wazzup m'man?"

The eyes, looking down from a black iron railing in old New Orleans. A harness lolling on a mannequin. Red white and blue quills. Stroking aquiline foregrounds. Black stroke thighs, the way down, formal harmonies. Stippled thighs, white thighs, those eyes. Skimming ballrooms across my plasma TV.

Those eyes: eternal shrine to Elsa Lancaster.

She was remembered of course from Savannah. Well, that was the original. I mean, let's face it, what was she but poor white trash that advanced frame by frame, pixel by pixel, inch by digital inch, to become the loveable, huggable cartoon angel of our squeaky-clean dreams? If not that, what? An angel to be penetrated, flummoxed, exfoliated, bent over backwards, ridden fast and driven to final spasms later.

"Ride her fast and furious," said the captain. "If she doesn't cooperate, give her a few slaps with the crop whip. She'll come around. I've seen this kind of filly before, and they're not easy to train."

Plasma TV eyes. High definition, dontcha know. Highlights on those puppies. Dimpled shades. The press doting behind hedgerow upon hedgerow: "Oh, did you see that? The cute little thing with the... Yeah, that. I mean, who would have believed it?"

Not now, not Zen. But she was beyond all formulations, our dear, dear girl. What we wanted could not be categorized or altered or

beseeched or bewildered, syncretized or sanitized. Little by little dear was the gods' own delight. They crooned like minstrel drag hustlers on Mount Olympus with mock sadsack faces gone all ovoid like jaws purloined from Edvard Munch. They rolled like diabolic gamblers, bones clattering before the last dance.

They rolled so as not to be seen, to be legendary, to be stiff and yet flexible, furled and yet unfurled, mean and yet relaxed.

Those plasma TV eyes, those thighs, my Elsa.

We'll make our fortunes, all of them step by step, if we have to sprawl face down in Gloria Swanson's swimming pool forever. We'll be the limp and soggy greenbacks just loosed from prison, eyes of fire glazed once, twice, three strikes for the lady. Just give us enough time, and we'll freeze Manhattan for you. Break out loose blocks of decadence as the pieces flake and free-fall. Just for you, my lovely. My angel. My eternal shrine. Flakes soft and fine, piece by piece.

She didn't understand. Kohl running gimmicky Deathbride. Abbott wanted a purer strain. But I think it's too late. Frozen empiricism. Concrete cell formation. This is the final floorshow.

"Give me the eggs, damn you." Windy suspirations of forced breath. Lamentations, lachrymations. Horse shit. An entire Greek chorus shifts a few microns in their marble togas. Blink and you'll miss her.

Kohl-black, no gimmick cybersculture Bride. We need to take another blood sample, you know the drill. Esoteric propagation of regulatory inhibitions, Body formations all to riot.

Eternal shrine to Elsa Lancaster. We need you. We need you to build the future.

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To be used on the girls of Moon Camp Americana: rotwang-rotating blades, for speed and efficiency. Anesthetic snuffbox. Fornication on electrified field grids. Morphogenetic folly. Mesmerized, intoxicated by the light glancing from her eyes.

As the poet says, they want out. Anywhere out of this world. To get fucked, get screwed, on anything: alien DNA, biomorphic forms,

chemicals, enzymes, proteins. To breed, to heat. To fill with undine lust. To manifest dark strategies against architecture. To destabilize forces so criminally drained already of all life, all heat, all matter, that to vacuum forth the last chunk of matter would render them empty. If shells is what you want, shells is what you get, my friend. For transportation, celebration, alimentation, protozoic life forms breeding.

You know the drill. It's a cold, unfriendly place out there in cyber. Has to be another half-breed. Hydrochloric gas. No answer from the hearts of space. Down in the cryocore, anesthetized just for you. Come on, that look is poison. Needles of pain in your dark eyes. White radiance. Screams from burst shells. Surround sound tentacle worship. And Elsa Lancaster, we need you.

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The death sentence itself is marked by elaborate protocols. Filigreed for death by inscrutable pixelated Druids. The other pieces move, this one stands still.

"Start," she commands. "White moves first."

Stark, she commands that white.

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On the lowest rung of the concentric spiral forming the inner architecture of the NAR's top-secret moon base, an aquarium-like tank filled a space fifty feet long and thirty feet tall. Panes of shockproof synthetic plastic exerted strength great enough to resist quakes, fires, floods and most conventional weaponry.

Milky green liquid washed in slow circles around a humanoid figure, a body crisscrossed by an optic grid that tracked him, day and night.

Although technically the thirteenth rung, the area was known as "the Ninth Circle". It had been built for one purpose: warehousing Jason Voorhees. Initially scheduled for cryostasis, Jason's body was basking in a warm amniotic bath, fed by dozens of lead lines and tubes. Many of these tubes simply pumped Jason full of tranquilizing

agents. Others took core samples from time to time for routine analysis.

He was soft enough to inspire rhapsodies of deliquescence from the late Dr Wimmer, had he lived to share the joy. Never mind that the subject in question had no pulse, no discernible brainwave activity, and was, according to the most sensitive diagnostic instruments, as sentient as the average turnip.

Immense precautions governed even the most casual access to Jason's body. A series of interlocking, pressure-locked doors opened only with an access code based on the visitor's DNA signature. Beyond the doors lay a decontamination chamber. Here, hot chemical soup pumped through needle-like nozzles covering every inch of the visitor's skin. Finally, a skintight one-piece lab suit was literally sprayed on, a lightweight but impenetrable helmet, clamped tightly on the head.

These protocols were sound, based on experience. So far, Jason hadn't even twitched, even while he was carefully decocted from the *Marduk's* containment tube, plugged in and placed in his bath like a comatose scorpion. But nobody was taking any chances. Every member of Team Jason—at least those belonging to the scientific community—had been debriefed on Planet of the Beast. They'd seen the vircher tapes, suffered the horrors of the Reality Studio and relived the agony of the *Marduk's* crew.

Sentient or not, turnips don't rip off heads with the ease of someone popping open a can of soda. If Jason was no longer a man, he was definitely not a vegetable.

Jason was an anomaly.

In an era that had supposedly vanquished superstition, the fanciful languages of sorcery and alchemy translated into hard, gleaming science, Jason was a changeling. A witch's spawn. Indestructible, imperturbable. In short, impossible.

Jason was the top priority for the New American Republic's Advanced Weapons Division. The man dedicated to turning this sodden lump into sleek, sexy weaponry, Dr Armando Castillo sat hour by hour before the tank, a laser writer shaped like an old-

fashioned fountain pen poised over an old-fashioned clipboard treated with media contrast material.

The owner of Earth II's largest collection of Jasoniana—the ghoulish collectibles of a lifetime devoted to indiscriminate slaughter—Castillo had studied the phenomenon in such great depth that he sometimes wondered where he ended and the Jasoniana began.

He had it bad.

At nearly seven feet tall, with a salt and pepper goatee, a silvered ponytail stretching down his back and severe-looking glasses perched on his aquiline nose, Castillo posed a fearsome spectacle.

Up close, the man looked even scarier. The left side of his face was artificial. A robotic eye extruded from a mass of scar tissue; a little souvenir of the past. Yet hunched over his chicken scratchings, Castillo showed another face: the blissful mien of pure scholarship.

The science crew on Moon Base held Dr Castillo in high esteem, though his background was sketchy where it wasn't altogether black. Like many of them, Castillo had struck a deal, the government providing erasure of his record and infinitely suspended jail terms, while he, in return, gave them the focus of his obsession; the high glare of his particular madness.

At ten years old, Castillo had taken apart his pet rabbit, a lop-eared, dopey-looking creature named Rupert, to, as he put it, "study the mechanism at the level of its working parts".

While some locals took the boy's action as a sign of incipient psychosis and covertly suggested that his parents remand him to an appropriate institution, his parents took it as a symptom of budding genius. Somewhere in his hard copy records, Castillo kept a snapshot from that period: a family portrait in which young Armando, his slick, brilliantined hair offsetting a pair of owlish, blood-speckled glasses, appeared centrally, holding the freshly dismembered pet by the feet.

In the halcyon years before the Terminal War Against Evil, Castillo kept more than a few pets. Rejoicing to share a vocation with his son, his father, Aguave Castillo, showed him the secrets of his laboratory deep within the jungles of New Salvador. He helped Armando to build, and rebuild, an elaborate series of "kits": animals poached

from the wildlife preserve known as El Mysterioso, home to life forms cloned from Earth Prime. Mapping, for example, the nervous system of an ocelot, Aguave took pains to instill in his son the virtue of ceaseless experiment and careful analysis of results.

"It is always provisional," he warned as the feline thrashed against its leather restraints. "Ours is not to celebrate discovery, but to further its growth. Let science teach you. Never try to teach science."

In addition to the nights of blood-spattered glory at the laboratory, Aguave introduced Armando to books. These were not 'actives, not holopapes, but real books, bound in leather and sewn in signatures.

A few dedicated craftsmen still made these things for the decadent politicos who liked them for their conspicuous expense, but Aguave actually read. A practice he passed on to his son.

Wearing protective suits, father and son sat in a clean room and pored over these rare volumes. Through this tutelage, Armando learned about the precursors of science, men like Paracelsus and Giordano De Bruno. He also learned about doctors whose work was still considered too radical for the masses, though it had been covertly applied to every high-level government psych operation since the First War on Evil.

Prominent among these names were people like Wilhelm Reich, the man who discovered the properties of orgones. And, of course, Aloysius Wimmer: Mr Softie.

But Dr Castillo's reading wasn't limited to the scientific. Aguave felt strongly that empirical science gave only half the picture. He introduced his son to literature—the poetry of Baudelaire and Plath, the early novels of Huysmans, and especially, the work of De Sade.

It was this latter author whose lessons served the budding doctor best, as he trained himself to withstand the pain of others while finding ever-subtler methods of inflicting it. But causing pain was only a means to an end, a path of discovery that began with the rabbit. What makes them tick, he asked himself incessantly? How does the mechanism operate at its basic, functional level?

The same instinct drove him now. In his callow youth, Castillo sought the secrets of life, mistaking an infinitely complicated organic dynamo for a piece of Cartesian clockwork.

As an adult with a shady past, Castillo sought something else, but with the same totalizing zest: the secrets of death. The creature before him held that key as surely as if he gripped it in one of those swollen, metallic paws.

They said that Jason had no life in him. They were wrong. The instruments, Castillo had decided, the instruments were to blame. They weren't properly calibrated. More than that, they weren't sensitive enough to detect the quantum liminal state that held Jason Voorhees suspended between two radical states of being. They simply read the creature as they would any life form. That was their fatal flaw.

If Castillo lived by any one credo, it was this: the map is not the territory. Jason's readings weren't the sum of his being, just the fluorescence of a test medium. Scribbling furiously on the media pad, Castillo worked out his theories in a series of baroque mathematical equations. At the end of an infinitely recursive spiral, where probability dictated only further corkscrews, Castillo saw something else: a numerically embedded window. Simply put, life and death were not the only two choices. Between these static poles lay subtle frequencies that only numbers could detect. Subtle frequencies that manifested themselves as Strange Loops. Numbers, plus instinct, and deadly patience, would yield the desired results.

At times, while watching the beast slumber, Castillo could have sworn he saw sentient movement, behavior dictated by will, beyond reflex. Then the two coal-red eyes seemed to penetrate his own. He locked wills with the monster, felt the vertigo of his own culpability. What separated him from this thing, the cyberbeast that felt neither sorrow nor remorse? Castillo felt himself slipping away into a void of liquid metal. It would be so easy just to float there, a healthy, postmodern shark.

What the scientist had done to further knowledge, the monster had done to further a terribly justified sense of vengeance. And if Castillo could only harness that vengeance to a government agenda, he might have something more than a free pass. Who knows, Castillo thought? They might even give him the Nobel Peace Prize. He wouldn't be the first person guilty of crimes against humanity to win that honor.

With a sense of fatality that tasted like sickness, Castillo knew: deciphering the beast's genetic core would be insufficient unto itself. What were needed were samples of fresh, uncorrupted flesh—uncorrupted not in the spiritual sense, of course, but the biological. For contrast purposes.

If he wanted to discover Jason's secret for infinite cellular vitality, Castillo would also need to obtain the conditions for a controlled test. The sickness rose again when he considered his options: illicit factory-ground unknowns, delivered by robot-controlled shuttles; synthetic DNA, strung together from vat-grown amphibians, run through endless sims, delivered to the vacuous technobots of the new regime; or, right next door, those nubile ladies from Moon Camp Americana.

Right. Next. Door.

It was a simple choice for Castillo's mind to make, but his body responded like that of a man forced to wolf down tainted cheese. He galloped to the facilities, purging himself to exhaustion. Nothing came up but mouthfuls of bright yellow bile. Castillo stared at his haggard face in the mirror. Screw your courage to the sticking place, he told himself. Stick your place to the courage-thing. You can do this. Feeling much better, Castillo returned to his private quarters to pore over the Moon Camp manifest. And mop his brow. Repeatedly.

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Juan Jimenez "Ichtal" Gonzales—"JJ" to his friends—cared more for facts than he did emotions, at least to the outside world. So far, the mask of objectivity held tight.

To the casual observer, JJ was ice. He could handle facts, control, manipulate and spin them. But inside, he knew a different story, even if that story did make him feel like a Neopuertorican drag queen.

JJ valued facts. The ability to master them meant power over his environment. This was a crucial ability for someone who had passed from one foster home to another, his parents having mysteriously vanished during a government coup. The perpetrators of that affair

were thought to have been disposable black ops hired by the External Operations brass at New American Republic's subspace headquarters. The Circle of Heretics, some called it, or, more crudely, the Circle of Shit.

Nice people didn't go there.

The evil swarmed like nanoflies to a fresh human corpse. By the time he was fifteen, Gonzalez had pieced together enough of the puzzle to saddle him with a permanent case of paranoia—an itch for secrets, a sixth sense for duplicity. A personality defect in most people became a lifesaving tool for Gonzalez; what he didn't know about his environment, the people around him, could kill him. It had killed his parents, scientists both, disappeared them deep into the jungle in the hands of a death squad. And behind those hands? JJ wasn't certain.

But he did have a very, very strong hunch.

When Gonzalez wished to remain unobserved, he did his private transactions in public. His favorite public/private place was a cybercafé called Eye Dream, only a handful of clicks away from the underground dwelling he called home.

Eye Dream was mostly friendlies—hackers, hired geeks, anarchopacifists, source code hounds and others who preferred their own company, or that of machines, to other life forms. His people.

The constant surveillance made it attractive. Everyone who walked into Eye Dream was essentially "bagged and tagged" by roving government agents. They came in the form of the polite, unobtrusive clerks who worked the tincture bar. They came on in less obvious ways. But the clerks were paid such low wages that their attention could easily be distracted; plus, most of them had dark secrets that could easily be used to advantage: designer drug addiction, larceny, congenital scotophilia, that kind of thing; which is why Gonzalez managed to stay under the radar while in full view. He hadn't even bothered with a flesh morph; he was, simply, invisible.

Not that any of it was simple, really. You had to be a real paranoid to understand how the government worked. How it really worked. They had their own data geeks, a virtual army of them, slaving away on red herrings, extremely plausible conspiracy theories (some of

which actually glanced off the hard truth before free-falling into outright surrealism) and whimsical fiction.

The Department of Public Disinformation was a branch office of the COH, the Circle of Heretics. Gonzalez knew this because he'd once been recruited for the DPD. It was a family legacy. This info was wired into your DNA, hard-wired. You didn't have a choice in the matter. Play the game, or play the game; or die. Those were the options.

Eye Dream looked like a space shuttle plowed nose down into a volcano. You entered from a catwalk that seemed to sway precipitously over a star-strewn night sky—actually a computer generated 3D model projected on ultralight media tarp, the sensation of crossing a flimsy gangway over deep space simmed with astounding technical elegance. Even JJ Gonzalez, a man who knew all the bells and whistles of virtuality, thought it made a very cool illusion.

The gangway opened right into a jagged, lightning-like crack in the shuttle's side. The interior looked cozy, but also featured lots of niches and crannies. It wasn't difficult to find a place to work. And if you didn't mind the clerks, with their stuffed bunny eyes, empty smiles and endless free samples, the Dream was a lot more comfortable than most offices.

JJ knew there wasn't much he could actually find out from the public news sources. That had been true for longer than he had been alive. But he had become an expert at reading between the lines. Besides, extracting a thin strand of truth from a rope of official lies wasn't something you learned in a classroom. It was a matter of survival.

Gonzalez swiped his AllCard against a slot on the side of the café's matter compiler. According to the card, he was a registered Supranet user known as Sheridan Campbell—this being an AI program that Gonzalez had built to emulate his persona for public purposes.

The MC emitted a series of white noise jets, letting him know that his request was being processed. Take your time, Gonzalez ventured. It's all good. Eye Dream's MC was an extremely specialized piece of nanomachinery, generating wafer-thin pieces of media contrast

material. These came in all shapes and sizes, emblazoned with the cute cartoon icon, Rasputina, company mascot for the biggest producer of MCs on Earth II. The other producer, which made the Cornucopia Machine, had been relegated to off-Earth use, though many, including Gonzalez, thought the Cornucopia was an infinitely better piece of hardware.

Gonzalez selected a nondescript format that looked like a dagger made from mirror fragments. Waited for the machine to do its thing. Compilers were getting faster and faster these days, so Gonzalez figured the process wouldn't take longer than a few ticks. While waiting, he sidled up to the sloping pink neon of the smart bar and ordered a tincture. Something cool, tonic and nonabrasive was required. JJ's nerves felt like the end product of a Prevac sawmill with rusty blades. Holding the tincture vial with its clear, cold blue liquid gingerly between thumb and forefinger, he found his favorite nook, retrieved the contrast shard from the MC and fed it into a reader that lay flat against the wall.

You figured the news as a cryptogram, read it sideways and upside down. Bits of the truth actually did survive in there, like food caught between the teeth. The rest, fully ninety-five per cent of the news, cleverly concealed a great deal of usable information.

Uncovering the useful stuff was usually a matter of simple logic. Negative propositions you read as affirmative ones. Positive statements could be blinders, mean the opposite of the literal. More often than anyone would guess, the news could be absolutely true, but buried in a context of utter nonsense. And sometimes the real news was there for all to see, on the front page. Until somebody got nervous. Then nouns started changing shape. Verbs got the willies and morphed into ampersands.

Nothing, not even headlines, wanted to look like prey.

Gonzalez passed the optical mouse over the righthand side of the shard and pulled up a menu. For a moment he was tempted by the brightly lit vircher chat rooms and a quick, delirious cyber-roll with synthebian babes programmed after the *Kama Sutra*.

But he could have that anytime, and with women who felt and looked real enough for government work. Instead, Gonzalez honed in

on the flashing hotlink to NAR's Public Information Center.

He asked the interface to pull up everything it had on Moon Camp Americana.

He really had to admire the spin they'd put on this thing. As an artifact of pure disinformation, it was one for the archives.

According to Public Information Services, and with the assistance of a lively pseudointelligent program that resembled the 20th Century Earth Prime cartoon character Betty Boop, Moon Camp Americana was a sort of high-end finishing school cum summer camp for teen girls.

Highlights—pictured in full-spectrum 3D broadband—included rafting, fishing, mountain climbing, live games, dances and other social events. Even campfires. That last touch, mused Gonzalez, was a stroke of brilliance. Stoke their fires, he thought, and carry on the lies. Good going, vatos.

What the PIC server was loath to tell the public, Gonzalez quickly plucked straight from the source. First, it was obvious that Moon Camp wasn't for the average citizen. The overhead on the thing had to be huge. Gonzalez guessed that the healthy outdoor events promised in the article—really more of a PR puff piece/infotainment—had to be built within a really colossal biosphere. Terraforming was involved; virtual architecture, synaesthetic programming, and other kinds of technology still in the beta stage.

Not even, or especially not, teenagers bought that kind of overt lie. But they played along, for whatever reason. Just like he did. "Betty Boop" chirped on about the character-forming properties of Moon Camp, passing from a dismal picture of lifeless, pallid teens slouching in a vircher parlor like zombies propped up by technology, to the wonders and mysteries of the Moon Camp experience.

Looking closely, Gonzalez realized that the "before" picture was deliberately low-res and flattened, its colors washed out, subdued as the actors in the parlor. Wouldn't be surprising if they were Liquex heads, he thought. A few years of that stuff, and mental clarity was something you fled like a cybervamp from the triple cross.

A subliminal montage flickered over the scene, a bit composed of a few frames of Edvard Munch's painting *Puberty*, its naked

adolescent girl menaced by a phallic shadow; a galaxy of death's heads; an unrelated loop of anti-drug propaganda—shark's tooth hypo. Gonzalez liked that one.

The Boopster's curves and sultry eyelashes coiled up on the edge of the picture. Her head inclined forty-five degrees toward the Moon Camp footage.

"Shall we move on?" she trilled. It always tickled Gonzalez that a bookmark with curves could actually get him aroused.

"Yes," he breathed back in a husky voice, wondering if anyone was listening. Wondering if he cared how weird this looked. No contest. Clearly, Moon Camp was where every girl child of the elite would master her impulses, conquer her fears and challenge new horizons. Its existence fed on the nostalgia for Earth Prime rituals that swept the NAR every few decades.

A decade past, there had been Moon Scouts. The failure of Moon Scouts wasn't so much the function of a lack of enthusiasm for the organization as it was under funding—the program had died in a midnight session of Congress conducted by bleary-eyed Senators who would have signed just about anything at that point.

Moon Camp was different.

It was different because jobs were on the line. Political jobs, with the special interests that fed on them like blood-bloated ticks. A cold wind of conservatism was sweeping through the halls of Congress, borne by a new and extremely powerful constituency-Teknopriests.

These blackened monoliths of back-to-basics education and moral reform had long been considered a joke by those outside the Beltway. Many in Congress itself figured them for an art prank, a new meme-design perpetrated by NeoSituationists or Reality Hackers, among the more active anarchist groups. Like everyone else with a direct feed to the command and control nodes, Gonzalez knew the real story.

It didn't matter that JJ's feed was elicit, a hack job. Nor that he lived in an environment borrowed from the classic 20th Century novel, *Invisible Man*, by the Prevac author Ralph Ellison. It was the truth. Gonzalez lived among shadows, yes, but those shadows had life in them.

Unlike Plato's cave, in which a shadow-borne simulacra masked reality, JJ's hole in the ground plugged him right in. It gave him access to the nerve center of NeoWashington. More access, in fact, than many of the top think tankers could possibly imagine. With the aid of this access, JJ knew the threat posed by the Teknopriest conclave. He could smell their sanctimonious spoor on the Moon Camp literature too.

A fun spot for Earth II girls to grow?

The opportunity of a lifetime?

Yeah. And Earth Prime was still habitable. Unless his instincts were completely deranged, JJ recognized Moon Camp Americana for what it really was—behavior mod boot camp for the delinquent spawn of the elite.

Just in time for an election. How timely.

JJ stood up and slid the contrast media into the recyclables bin. Fodder for the matter compiler, even though it was perfectly good. But Eye Dream's corporate license required all materials for public use to be completely sterile, virus-free.

To Gonzalez, this made a certain kind of cockeyed sense. Only the government could spy on you, essentially. Spying on the spies was a game for outlaws only. A game played underground, in a circulating netherworld known as softmachine. JJ's temples throbbed lightly. A slight blue haze tickled his peripheral vision.

Costly, and only mildly legal, the sensorineural implants bought him time—time to murder, time to create, time to move undetected and make the connections he needed to make. They told him he was being tracked. By whom, or what, he couldn't yet tell. But the surveillance had to have been set in motion after he'd disposed of the media shard. He swiftly glanced around the café. A random scanner, darkly? No, they didn't work like that, wouldn't give them anything but junk data, the dismembered remains of a hacked Gordian knot. Someone was breathing down his neck, in a manner of speaking.

But who? And why?

The tincture was working on him. After the euphoria came the cold flashes. The sweats. A churning deep in the bowels.

JJ made a beeline for the toilet facilities. He sat down on the cold, splintered slabs of synthed porcelain. He buried his head between his hands. Thickly beaded dreads slapped against his knuckles; again with the blue haze. Then a voice, voice that rose from some impenetrable darkness—the high, thin, unmistakable signal of a canine AI.

Grumbling, JJ tried to force out the thick matter gathered in his gut, but it was no use. He'd have to take a purgative later.

Carefully washing and drying his hands, JJ quickly drew a fresh pair of sensor-scrambling gloves from his jacket pocket. He exited warily, looking back and forth from the bar to the long rabbit warren of utility rooms and storage facilities at the back of Eye Dream. Passing a series of doors on the opposite side of the hallway, JJ felt the sensors kick in again. As if on cue, an LED sparkled to life above a door marked "Access Restricted". JJ stepped inside with the grim fatalism of a prisoner who willingly walks to his execution.

Something whirred overhead. The impromptu elevator slid fast. Inexorably, to a destination below the club proper. Viral splatter of the corn gods.

A random numeric process dictated the elevator's speed and trajectory. A slim window in the door let Gonzalez know that his progress was not one hundred per cent vertical.

In fact, he was being shuttled within the guts of an organic building matrix, which eventually would pour him out into the softmachine like a swirl licorice and vanilla ice cream. Until then, his only recourse was to sit tight. He'd bought the ticket; now he was taking the ride.

A puzzle, that canine AI.

As always, the ride stopped on the threshold of severe claustrophobia. Taking a deep breath, immediately regretting it, JJ stepped into the underground. No great strides had been taken in recirculating the foul air down there; for all he knew, a single hit of low-grade oxygen/nitrogen compound puffed from some clandestine MC device in the walls.

The air was cleaner on the dust moons of Styrinx 12. Or so he'd gathered from unnamed sources in off-world intelligence. Here too, a

sinister mirror of the layout of Eye Dream. A series of niches and tables rolled up to the monolithic bar. Desultory cyberdancers writhed in a thin parody of eroticism, faces cold, impassive and glittering as mirrors.

One girl reminded him of Katrina. Which nearly brought it all back. Naturally, it was not she. The Great Kat had skipped the home planet long ago in the arms of a new beau, a renegade from the Mujahadeen system wrapped tightly in an all-weather burnoose, leaving only the tip of a dark, oily nose exposed to the world.

Kat the destroyer was roving the ideosphere, dispensing psychological terror and subtly disturbing memes that children took in with their breakfast cereal. She was an opportunist, a quick-change artist, a genetically enhanced freak. And, so far, JJ's only true love.

Kat the gorgeous. The indestructible. The magical.

JJ scanned the scene, evading subtle invitations to romance beamed in on broadband directly to his medulla. That whole cultish brainstem scene was getting tired already, long before Kat turned it into a total joke. If you wanted to chew raw adrenal gland and access the Akasha.net without dialing in, that was your privilege.

But JJ wasn't interested in that. He was looking for a machine that looked like a dog. They all came here—refugees from hostile gaming systems, walking genetic slagheaps, mercenary curators of future war museums—the lost, the unwanted, the diseased.

These walls had ears. And eyes, and teeth, and hair; hotwired for your surveillance pleasure. The walls were made of UDT—undifferentiated tissue—which took on the shapes of ambient fantasies and dreams, and from the looks of it, most of these dreams and fantasies were pretty damn dark. Many involved a serial killer named Jason.

Jason Voorhees.

Long spears interlaced in the flesh walls, connected by thought—quick wires, nearly neat vapor trails. These in turn formed a series of circuits. These generated enough juice to keep the veins engorged. Alongside the spears, bas-relief hockey masks poured from the walls. Behind the masks lurked untold pinpoints of iridescent red light, as

though the monster was rolling through the molecular matrix all the time, trying on masks and spears: a homicidal size queen.

JJ took a seat near the bar. Lately he had become caught up in a recursive flashback episode. He was always trying to order a drink and light a cigarette when the blinking sign above the bar went dead.

(Hurry up please; it's time.)

He nodded approvingly at some of the more recent décor, elaborate morphs spilling across the walls. All hail the new flesh, he thought, and wondered if that was too self-reflexive, even for softmachine. Figured it was adequately so.

Cheers.

So, where was he, this canine hero? This artificial dogsbody? This perro with the internal punishment programs? Of course: there he was at the end of the bar, staring morosely into his tincture, idly fussing with his swizzle stick. Moping.

"Orale, Simon—can I buy you a drink?" JJ asked, sauntering over to the dog and clapping him on his fury back. The AI barked in the universal language of drinking: elemental binary code, Yes and No, responses chiming quick and slick, esse.

The answer was Yes.

"Good to finally meet you," said JJ genially, gingerly managing the wafer-thin slice of bar stool.

"So what are these subliminal telepathic messages I keep getting about Moon Camp Americana, anyway? That's kind of an annoying habit, you know. You could have just telepresenced. Spared us both the time and energy, not to mention the risk. But now that we're both here, you have some information to convey. Diga me lo."

The dog nodded. His collar LED lights blinked on and off in random formation.

"Go on." For a second the dog seemed baffled. Its paw froze in the air while reaching for its drink. But JJ understood.

It was having a neurolog jam, the poor thing. Total meltdown of the Al/canine hard drive.

When the dog found its voice again, it defaulted on an irrelevant blip of inner monologue. JJ bit down on his back molars and set up

the automatic dog AI-to-posthuman translation feed hardwired into his brain.

"It's okay," he said with a hint of affection. "You can speak normally."

JJ really liked dogs.

"I'm sorry to bother you," said the dog. "Basically I'm here to give you a message."

"A message? What kind of message?"

"From your handlers. The guys in the iron tower. You know, the Controllers."

JJ laughed so hard he inhaled Blue Death. It felt good—fizzy, bubbly—for the second before his nasal membranes swelled up. Eyes of the green fire.

He mopped his suddenly perspiring brow with a napkin. "I'm sorry to laugh, but it sounded like you said you were carrying a message from the Controllers."

The dog cleared its throat nervously. "Yes, that's what I said. I don't know how much of this you're aware of, but you have friends in very high places.

"And, I might add, enemies as well."

JJ exhaled a tiny air bubble and scratched an epidermal sliver from his nose. So many clichés from one canine AI, within the same doggy breath—it defied the odds.

"Yeah, I kind of knew that. It's my business to know these things. Kind of the reason we're here right now, talking. Doggie. Or what amounts to... anyway. So what do 'the Controllers' have to say?"

"I would appreciate it," said the dog stiffly, "if you would refrain from using that tone of voice with me."

"What tone of voice?"

"The tone of voice you're using right now. The tone of voice that says you're superior to me somehow. Just because you're human and soft-wired rather than canine and hardwired, that's no—"

"Well you know, I'm a bit of both," said JJ, cutting him off at the pass. "And I didn't mean to make fun. It's just that well, you know"—he doubleclicked his right eyemouse—most of the time when someone starts talking about the Controllers, it's a tip-off. They

might need to take a little nap. Or stay off the Uranian crank, at least. Right?"

If a dog could smile, this one did. He knew something about the Uranian.

"No worries. I'm not really offended. Just using a sort of code right now."

JJ nodded. "I get it. So the Controllers would be..."

The dog grew suddenly irritable in a Runyonesque way. "Would be, I don't know, some game system. That's it. Controllers are a game system."

The cybercanine drew a ragged, asthmatic breath. "Listen pal, I've got the whole brood waiting for me at home, and the meter's running, if you get my drift. So, what do you say? Here's the message.

The dog fished around in one of many leather side bags until it found what it was looking for: a poisonous red microdot.

"Just do one of these jobbers, okay?"

JJ nodded. He hoped the drugtext had some fantasy sidebars as well. It was going to be a long night. As the drug took hold, the portentous creeping feeling he'd had all day solidified, defined by zones of intensity, fields of flux. The drugtext lacked fantasy sidebars, but did enhance JJ's goggleless access to the Supranet.

All of the London Jefferson material came pouring out from Limequick and underground P2PK networks that JJ found while trolling through the usual black box media. The dog had been unusually accurate. The dot first took JJ to a virtual bathroom stall.

For transsexual droids.

Okay, but once he discovered an encrypted version of London's Ominex Black, her journal, dusted with a fractal version of low-res Uranian crank.

(Evidently, Uranian was the mode of encryption du jour.)

So External Operations had known all along about Claude Bartox and his plan to clone Jason Voorhees, the mythological 20th Century serial killer. They'd sealed it over quickly, of course, buried the story with a mass of irrelevant data, covered it in spectral off-gassing, quicklimed its ass.

By the time the story came out, leaked through the usual channels, it would already be old hat. Yesterday's holopapes. A scratch and yawn jobber at best.

The NAR could count on the fact that the most outrageous indiscretions politicians could conceive bleached out next to the drama of reality holovision. "Live from the Death Planet" beat "Congressional Candidates Caught With Pants Down" every time.

What they couldn't count on was security. Security against leaks. Nothing else mattered. The hypertexts connecting Bartox, Jefferson and External Ops blazed across JJ's laptop screen in opalescent smears.

As he eyescrolled through the links, hitting the data vortices first one set at a time, then in parallel, JJ began to make connections. Connections that at first blush defied logic, but on further thought, seemed almost inevitable.

This much was certain: the coming elections would require a sacrifice. Sacrifice. Holocaust. Why did those words give off such a high white glare? They seemed to practically telegraph teen spirit. What was his subconscious trying to communicate? What sacrifice? A burnt offering? London Jefferson, to the war gods?

Maybe.

Yet nasty as it was, even that little episode smacked of government skullduggery as usual. Nothing beyond the pale about an out of control science project, a cover-up, a pregnant incubatrix sent straight into the maw of an asteroid belt.

That kind of thing happened at least once a month.

No, it wasn't Jefferson's demise forming the nodal flung up by this hot emergent property. Not that the London Jefferson episode wasn't a shame. JJ shredded through the webscreens telling her story: extreme grainy close-ups of her last communication, etched in molecular acid on a slate of smartrock at New MIT; the animated GIFs taken of her in her college days; sub-pornographic holovids of London and her French boyfriend, Andre something, some geezer had uploaded to Supranet.

He paused to save some screenshots. For later. Pretty necro of him, but then everybody has their vice, right?

London's story was poignant. They inevitably were. Not only because of the waste of brains and beauty it represented, but because this kind of waste was taken for granted. Even JJ had to concede the fact: all of his own technological wizardry hardly made him unique. The only difference between him and most of the clowns trolling the Supranet these days was that his was an original brain.

Not a substrate upgrade. That, so far, had made all the difference. But with cloning right on the cusp of legal, intellectual originality itself would soon be obsolete. Even he would become disposable, his brain another chic commodity shrink-wrapped for the masses, spliced into carefully dubbed night-vision solo sex footage of 21st Century necroporn icon, Paris Hilton.

It wasn't London's sacrifice that throbbed at his temples like some kind of mantra-turned-deadly migraine.

What, then?

Then it struck him all at once: Moon Camp Americana. Jason Voorhees. Death Moon. The crime of the fucking century was about to be transmitted, live, to billions of viewers around the globe. Only thing was no one would see it happen.

I want to be your parasite god.

Black, resinous creatures rose from the pit, glowing with accents of the jambah. Eccentric triquadrillionaires pour fractal essences into meaningless bank accounts on offshore planets.

Random expatriates sought mercy at the shrine of Shri Jason.

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Extract from *The Great Kat*  
*A Short History or Reflection.*  
By JJ Gonzalez.

*It starts like this:*

*They love their parasite god, yet they crucify his son.*

*They like history lessons, as long as it ain't their fucking history.*

*They want freedom yet go willingly into chains.*

*They like transpersonal therapy. Once they realize that no threat to their ego exists.*

*Nothing could go wrong.*

*No. Not like that.*

*Like with me. And that crazy lady.*

*Hell, I tell all you fools. You can dog me, but you can't shake me.*

*Yeah. A little bit about the story of the Great Kat.*

*Watcha-ley.*

*See, I had just been watching a little NeoJapanese Cybercore. You know, the viddies where the eyeball gouging is just for starters.*

*To build up the suspense, fool.*

*Now check it out.*

*I was just jacking into the mainframe, you know, accessing some of that Reality Studio. Mixing it up a little bit between NeoJapCore and RE/s. Like a magic eight ball.*

*Dude, I didn't know any fucking better.*

*Surprise, surprise. Guess who comes out.*

*Like she was the box and Pandora's hand in one.*

*Funny how that works.*

*Anyway.*

\*\*\*

JJ Gonzalez had been jacked into the Supranet the first time he heard from the Resistance.

At first he thought it was a routine hard drive swipe—an archaic, lo-fi term the Tribes still used for cerebellar head cleaning. That was when they took your brain, dumped its contents into the core of an artificial person; blew your brains out in some dark alley. That's what happened sometimes if you lurked on Cityofdiss.com, as JJ was doing. Fucking head cleaners will pay for this, thought JJ, a little edge of anger pushing his usual poise to the edge of chaos. But JJ held it steady. If they wanted a firefight, he would give 'em a firefight. The mother of all flame wars.

Cloning the source tag of the transmission fingering its way into his brain, JJ took a hit of Liquex and did a megamix of his old

headspace.

Then he fired the recalibrated "IJ Gonzalez" back at the Reality Hackers.

(Die by the sword, motherfuckers!)

If they were dumb enough not to use protection—thinking, maybe, that he couldn't spot them immediately at their stupid games—the hackers' brains would fry.

They'd be fool enough to try and betatest the simmed personality on themselves. Then, *fizz. Pop.* Liquid explosions from the heart of space. Regurgitated enzymatic coding spat from eldritch feeder tubes. Protein-folding nanobots writing recursive backwards instructions in psychometric Braille. A savage chemical screw driven right down into the brain core. Total meltdown of the human laptop. Some HAL 2000 shit.

They would sink like stones, burn like plastic dolls, while Gonzalez watched them. Big Cheshire cat grin lighting up his monitors, as they wriggled and sizzled.

And died, blood streaming from every new orifice their hijacked brains could conceive. Electric funeral rites. But not this time.

(No. No you fucking don't.)

Apparently, the attempted head swipe was just a way to get his attention. Some of the more advanced NeoSituationists from the Resistance game modelers used this kind of trick, just in case somebody was listening in. Well, they had his attention all right.

"What do you want?" Gonzalez typed back at the hack source in Mayan assembly code. He waited for the necessary confusion that would engender. Even for veteran programmers, Mayan assembly code was always a little weird.

"What is Moon Camp Americana?" asked a synthed voice. Over and out. That was the first contact.

The second contact came two weeks later: a young man—no older than twenty-five—staggered in front of JJ on the subway platform. JJ's reflexes kicked in immediately. He steadied the man before he fell onto the third rail. That would just be messy. A rope of white spittle had formed on the man's lips. He wore the face of a dead rock star. Literally, a dead rock star.

The man looked like Jim Morrison in his Paris period.

Jim "not to touch the Earth" Morrison. Complete with the flea-infested beard, absinthe stains crusted on his N-shirt and camouflage pants, the pockets bulging with old works. Not to mention a leather bullwhip.

"Are you okay? Shit, man, you look terrible."

The man nodded. "It's okay, I maybe took too much of the Uranian last night. Steady my nerves."

His eyes bugged out. He poured his right hand through a swathe of lank hair.

"Well my friend, it doesn't look like your nerves are in such great shape either."

"I know, I know. Look, I know who you are, okay. I've got some information."

"Information? What kind of information?"

The man glanced around the platform, nervously.

"Not here. Can we go get a tincture or something?"

"We can do Eye Dream. There's one down the street."

"I don't want to cause you any trouble. I have information. Can't talk now. Hurting."

"The shakes?"

"Yeah man. You wouldn't happen to have any..."

JJ shook his head. "You know that stuff will kill you, man. Only aliens and game module programmers can handle that shit anyway."

"I know. My mother was a game mod writer. Can we get out of here?"

"Sure, man. Sorry. Can you stand? Can you walk?"

"Yeah, I can walk."

The man stumbled.

"Okay look, take my arm, okay?"

They managed to make it to the smart bar without too much trouble.

Taking a little table in the back, JJ and the man, who said his name was Vic, sat down and ordered a Blue Death each.

"Remember the *Marduk*, man?"

"The *Marduk*?" JJ racked his brain. "Oh yeah, that subspace trawler. Something about it coming back missing the crew? What was that, a mutated virus? Psyop shit?"

"Yes." The man stared dead ahead, not making eye contact. "Yes."

His voice was monotonous, robotic.

"Look, I'm risking my life here—our lives—talking to you about this. But I had to tell someone. I have to tell someone."

"I helped design that mission. I was one of the people the NAR hired to make it work. I thought it was some defense thing, which I was helping out, you know, doing my part. Angels and devils will dance with you, and sometimes they're the same thing."

"But it wasn't defensive. It was offensive. How much do you know about the Advanced Weapons Division?"

JJ was silent. "I don't know what you're talking about, man."

"Oh come on, I know you do."

JJ was adamant. "Listen, I don't do that kind of shit any more. My parents are dead because of that. I just mind my own business."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I thought you might be on the Crank. Look, I know people. I could get you on a cure. Cut those lines, you know. Apomorphine, the antidrug. But you have to want to clean up."

"I don't fucking care about that!" Vic stood up. "I'm a dead man anyway. I'm a fucking dead man!"

His voice stabbed up a few octaves: a violin slashed with a razorblade.

"Okay, sit down and shut up, dude. Let's just say I was interested. Maybe I do a little research here and there. Just to keep my hand in, you know. But you, my friend, you've got to keep it together."

He pushed his own tincture across the table. "Look, drink my shot. It's not the cure, but it'll steady your hand. Take it easy. Good times."

"I know, I know."

It was an Eye Dream reference, an Eye Dream in-joke, just barely amusing in the present context.

Vic reshuffled his slack, shoulder length blond hair. His hands fumbling around the glass, he managed to do most of the Blue Death

without spilling it. But something was pulsing behind the man's eyes, something ugly. Tiny red dots swarmed over Vic's face. The corners of his face twitched, grew taut. His eyes bugged out, sagged on exhausted optic stalks. Cherry tomatoes exploded, crushed under heavy mannerisms.

In another instant, Vic was facedown in a pool of his own red, red kroovy, bleeding out like an Ebola victim. Losing fluids like a little bitch. Holy shit, thought JJ. Cookie cutters. Nanoweaponry.

They got him before he could tell me what he wanted to say. Something about the *Marduk*. The Advanced Weapons Division. But what, if any. thing, had this to do with Moon Camp? Were the two contacts totally unrelated? Was this the typical spooky overlap that happened when Reality Hackers and NeoSituationists got involved in Psyop programs?

Was it just routine bureaucratic technobullshit? What was coming down the pike? What the hammer? What the chain? In what furnace forged thy fucking brain? No, wait—

JJ smelled a colossal con. He just couldn't put a finger on any of its vectors. Yet.

Meanwhile, though, somebody needed mopping up. It was a noir moment, a cynical flashback to classic bad guy cinema. Hum of expensive static.

JJ backed away from the table. He waved at one of the service operators. "I think this guy requires some medical attention."

The operator smiled, a thin slit slicing its metal face from the inside. "Yes, sir."

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He could feel the hotbots closing in. They were out there, the gorms, casting invisible nets for data; looking for gaps, hollows and fissures of men.

JJ saw the geeks from time to time, despite the scramblesuits they wore. The black ice smothering these ops was thick as the firewall around the Pentagram at NeoWashington. The average citizen saw the gorms as dull flashes of light in the peripheral vision, shapeless

blurs on the landscape. Like vodka, they blended with almost anything.

The few conspiracy buffs, paranoia theorists who'd tried to "out" the gorms, got laughed out of town. Nobody believed such creatures could exist. They inhabited a place with the little people of Earth Prime, the fairies, pixies and other phantasmal folk.

If you saw them, a big risk accompanied your assertion of that fact. People looked at you with the irritable compassion reserved for hopeless addicts of Liquex, or the Uranian crank.

But there they were anyway, swarming the tubeway platform like a Utility Fog on a terminal bender. JJ's sense for trouble literally jangled in his ears.

"I know, I know," he muttered irritably. With a click of the molars, he shut off the audio feed. Pure visuals were best anyway. Not so distracting.

JJ bought a holopape from a vending machine and pretended to absorb himself in the latest exploits of the renegade cybersplatter band GodHammer. GodHammer's use of exploding prop heads and robotic flesh machines excited controversy with every election; each President, regardless of political affiliation, had an opinion about the band. Usually it was that they were a menace to civilization, and should be shot on sight.

Gonzalez knew God Hammer to be another mole program that gathered information on the citizenry through vastly popular interactive holomessage boards. He knew also that the band members were Actors' Equity, commanding only the bare rudiments of sound programming.

Like almost everyone he knew these days, GodHammer operated under deep cover. If they were like most people he knew, some part of them had internalized that cover, while the original personality died of neglect.

It was a sad state of affairs, but that was post-postmodern life for you. If they didn't accidentally swap your identity with some redhead clone at birth, you were lucky if you had most of your original working parts by the time you dropped off.

Covering his head with the holopape, JJ swiped his AllCard at the turnstile and headed for the platform. The train to Q Station had just pulled up. JJ joined the mass of citizens that jammed the car to capacity. He continued to read, idly glancing up every so often to locate the most conspicuous gorms.

Two of the bullet-headed agents sat across from him, their scramblesuits reformatting identities at nanosecond increments. Looking down the car, he saw that gorms had blocked both exits. Exhilaration turned to cold chills. Was this a trap after all? Maybe I should just play along, he thought. He was feeling a little shaky; then calm; then only a bit shaky.

"Come with me, sir," both agents simultaneously, cued by remote operator.

A liquid metal vise gripped JJ by the elbows. One of the gorms signaled the train's AI controller via optic surge. The car stopped. Quicksilver gorms lifted JJ onto the platform, then released their grip.

JJ felt a charge pass through his body, a microsecond of high voltage rock and roll.

"You may feel some slight discomfort," said Gorm One.

Bits of syntax chipped off like slices of fractal mica and splintered through JJ's tongue. He spat them out. The words surged from another world; they kept coming, postcards from Babel, translated poorly through a less than optimum receiving device.

"Yeah, I'll say," said JJ, trying assiduously to unravel a yard of cotton fuzz from his tongue. He was alert, very lucid, yet strangely unattached to what was going on—like watching the fractal splatter off a crystal ball mounted on a junkie's skull.

His jaws were miles apart. When opening, a universe fell out and spilled on the ground a sort of dry, chalky blue powder. For a moment, a series of radiating zigzag steps multiplied themselves to infinity. The steps turned, goose-stepped and crunched the floor with recursive mirror-sided spiral wells.

JJ's pager went off.

"Sorry," said JJ. "I have to take this call."

"Of course," said the two gorms simultaneously.

The words used JJ's brain as a tunneling device. The connection was crisp, immediate.

"Where are you?" asked the voice.

"Dude, I've got a situation here man. I can't talk right now."

"I know that, dude. But where are you?"

There was a hum of expensive static.

"If you know about the situation, you know where I am, dude. Why are you fucking playing me?"

"Playing you?"

"Dude. I am you." JJ was standing on the platform between the two agents, exactly where they had gotten off the train.

Only the picture was missing one thing: a backdrop. The station.

"Come this way," said Gorm One.

The agent had morphed into a dandy in a lavender, pinstriped suit, slick brown cane in his hand, a dainty handkerchief stuffed in his waistcoat pocket, a tiny, elliptical, faintly blue monocle neatly implanted a baby's breath away from his left eye.

Okay.

JJ looked at the handset again. It was subtly different. Something about the shape was off. He felt essentially normal. Just that his molecules had begun to subtly drift apart. He looked up at the agent. "I guess it was a bad connection," he said. JJ's breathing felt a little off.

"That's quite all right," said the agent. "You're allowed a bad connection now and again."

# FIVE

Mischa Laroque missed the joyride. She lounged beside her pool, an imperturbable Sphinx in a tangerine colored bikini that accented her long, curvaceous body. Mischa didn't care what her little friends had been up to. She was beyond that.

At seventeen, Ms Laroque had seen enough of the world and the habitable planets to know what she liked. Which was this: lounging poolside, safe at home in Earth II, a tall, cool glass of Blue Death by her elbow, five hundred post-fi comsat stations beamed directly onto her corneas.

Mischa was that kind of girl.

In what passed for a philosophy in Mischa's universe, the world operated according to a few simple, easy to memorize rules. According to these rules, her own existence was primary. Anything that tended toward her greater comfort could be classed in the category of "the good". Beyond that, nebulous waves blurred toward an irrelevant horizon. Or something.

Without being a true egotist, Mischa had invented a state of being that made the selfish look giving. And, like drones to a Queen Bee, her friends fed that state, keeping it plump and sated. She barely looked up as the patio glass door slid open. April Carlson, dressed in street clothes, her face nearly eclipsed in sun, battling white foam, strode towards the pool.

"Come and join me, my dear," said Mischa, barely inclining her head. "And get out of those ridiculous clothes." But the Queen Bee did miss her subjects, and she hadn't seen her friend in several days.

"My God, you look like you're in mourning, or shock. Do tell."

April sank into the deck chair on Mischa's left.

"It's all horrible. I don't want to talk about it. Do you have anything to drink?"

Mischa pointed a dainty forefinger to the crystal decanter on the deck table. "Plenty more where that came from, honey."

April popped the top and took a deep whiff. "Ughh, what is that stuff? Smells like fucking rocket fuel."

"Different strokes, my friend. I don't know, some boy gave it to me last Christmas. It's some sort of... elaborate pornographic hustle. I don't know."

April didn't pretend to follow along. Sometimes Mischa's spare elegance and calculated languor provoked gems of verbal style that only made sense under deep sedation. "Yeah, I suppose. Listen, did you hear about the parents' meeting?"

"Oh, that old thing."

"No, what have our lovely units been up to?"

April sighed. "My dear, they have been calculating our demise."

Mischa nearly sat up, but dignity prevailed against the fully vertical spine. "You don't say? No, but not mine. They wouldn't dare. Has the talk turned to Moon Camp again? That is so tiresome!"

"So you haven't heard anything? That's right, you're always plugged into your 'stories'. Well, it's pretty bad. After we got arrested —"

Mischa sat up. "You got arrested?"

"Yeah, you know, me, the gang. Over the Tri-City region, near Melrose Heights."

Mischa hadn't been out of the New Rose City clave for nearly two years. "Wow. How did that happen?"

"The usual. Drunk, reckless, out of control. They call us walking corpses, unholy living dead—you know the drill. They suspended my license, and I don't even have one! But the worst of it is we're all being sent to Moon Camp."

"That's too bad. I feel for you. Send me a postcard, 'kay?"

"No, ma cherie. You don't understand. You're going too."

Mischa's neck goose-lamped. "Honey, that's impossible, okay. First of all, my parents are not like your lame-ass suburban politico types, no offense. I just mean that they don't have to fawn and kiss ass. They're wired into the works."

"I know what your parents do, Mischa. And that's just the trouble—they're wired into the works. Did you know that your dad's contracts are tied directly with the success of the Publican party in this next election? If his guys don't win, who do you think'll be standing in line at the employment office? Mr Andy Laroque, just

like all the other shlubs. Wake up and smell the JavaScript, m'dear! Source codes and tags, hel-lo! In fact, you need to just wake up."

Mischa slid her mirror shades down her elegant ski nose and addressed April directly through violet lens implants.

"You know, I've been so busy it never occurred to me that something like this could happen. What are we going to do?"

"I'm fucked if I know, Mischa. Play along, I suppose. What else are we going to do? Besides, it could have been a lot worse."

"But what about my summer vacation?"

"What about it? Are you going to lie around and soak up rays until you get some awful type of skin cancer? And swill this shit," she pointed to the decanter. "What do you call it, the Blue Death? Okay, this is not good. But think—we'll be together. And who knows, maybe there'll be cute boys."

Mischa's expression changed subtly. "Cute boys?"

"Well, yeah."

"So it won't be a total rugmunch fest."

"You're disgusting, Mischa!"

Mischa smiled wickedly. "You ought to know."

\*\*\*

Later, Mischa admired the harsh shine of the sickle moon, its precision and its sheer edge. At times it became necessary for a girl, privileged as anyone on Earth II could be said to be, to consider her context. The totality. In other words, how she, a senior at New Rose High, fit the context of known spacetime. (At least, the chic, fashionable quarters of space-time. No use wasting one's self on dark matter. Puh-lease.)

According to her own standards, she naturally dominated. But by the light of a distant planet, even Mischa realized that the cosmos didn't circle around her body. It was a fine enough form for rock and roll, but the heavenly bodies themselves had been tragically uninformed of its fitness.

By the time the world revolved around her again, it might be the end of time. So she thought, looking up at the night sky, I wonder

what the moon is made of? Many a great mind had pondered this question over the preceding twenty-five centuries. Tycho Brahe had devoted a considerable amount of time to this question.

A confirmed addict of the Blue Death, Mischa could wrap her mind around questions that confirmed her absolute, essential place in the universe. Minus the moon, that is. Her fate lay fast: Moon Camp, or a military academy. Lesbian domination without her consent, or lesbian domination initiated by herself. The choice was clear: Moon Camp it would be.

According to its grimiest, yet least prurient critics, the moon could only be accounted for by a rogue asteroid that smashed itself against the face of Earth II many millions of years ago. Its familiar visage acknowledged that lineage through a biannual wink, as it twitched from eternal darkness to eternal light.

Mischa didn't care much. She saw the moon as some kind of viable analog to the Blue Death, a thing kept reliably by her elbow. A frozen chunk of space-time, a deliberate and cool mouthful of never, made palpable by its imminent place in her calendar of unlikely activities.

# SIX

The room had no doors, no windows. A virtual haunted mansion. Composed of nothing but piquant, horror-based clichés. Then again, it didn't have walls, either, strictly speaking.

JJ Gonzalez found himself seated in mid-air like a train in a Rene Magritte western. Comfortable enough, despite the disorienting feeling it brought. But then, he'd been disoriented for so long lately, that it kind of felt like home. He could use a drink, anyway. A strong drink, maybe some of the blue shit.

As if in answer to his silent request, a tube of tincture materialized in front of his right hand. JJ closed his fingers around it, inhaled (you got more of the flavor crystals that way), and drank. The liquid was more than deeply refreshing. It roved over his taste buds like a furry living thing. More than a dead skunk thing.

It gave him a taste. A revelation. The sensation of being alive. Only more so. He heard the voice simultaneously from every side of the virtual space.

"The Department of Public Disinformation only wishes to serve. It is in that capacity that you, Juan Jimenez Gonzalez, have been chosen."

"What the fuck?" JJ muttered to himself. "The Aztec goddess, Coatlepeh? But where, dude?"

He set the tincture down in front of him. The air closed around. Erased its memory.

"Chosen for what?" he asked the nonexistent walls.

"As a technical consultant, of course."

"In what capacity?"

"You will be sent to Moon Base Americana, with a very special mission. You are familiar, of course, with the name Dr Armando Castillo."

JJ gritted his teeth, swallowed his memories and nodded. "Yes, of course."

"We understand that, due to some unfortunate circumstances, your parents were involved in a psyop operation conducted by Dr

Castillo. One that resulted in their, uh, disappearance and death. Is that your understanding as well, sir?"

JJ felt flushed. "There were conflicting reports. Yes, I know about Dr Castillo's operation. He's notorious. And I'm pretty sure he was in charge of the black bag operation that—"

"Yes, we know." For a robot, the voice had an oddly soothing tone.

"But why me?"

"Why you? Why not you? You are the perfect person for this assignment. Nobody else has the in-depth experience to understand Castillo's psychology."

"You mean nobody else has less to lose."

"You may articulate the facts as it suits you. Our own priorities are very clear."

"We need somebody to keep an eye on Castillo. His expertise is vital to our mission on Moon Base. But his methods..."

"You're going to tell me that his methods are unsound."

"Not to sound too much like a cliché, but yes. Basically."

"So I'm kind of like your Marlowe, and he's my Captain Kurtz. Do I have that right?"

"Think of it less as a terminal assignment; more of a lurking protocol."

"A lurking protocol? Meaning, don't do anything until he steps out of line? Keep an eye out? That sort of thing? Which, considering his cosmetic defects, sounds like irony to me."

"We wouldn't want to advocate any unnecessary actions. We're an information service only."

"Of course you are."

"Refresh your drink?" asked the voice pleasantly.

"Why not?" said JJ. He could use it.

\*\*\*

By the time Roger Bordeaux was handpicked by the Deputy of Public Disinformation to create a reality holovision show in conjunction with Moon Camp Americana, he was a battle-scarred veteran of what was already being called the "New Hyperreality".

Like many in his generation, Bordeaux grew up with a burning yen to document his environment, coupled with an equally fierce need to warp and distort that environment—beyond all recognition.

Thus, as a child Bordeaux observed and recorded slow drips, thermal anomalies, the inadvertent splicing of incompatible DNA (pigs and elephants), and, most impressively of all, his own gradual submersion into an ice cube—a performance piece entitled, for no apparent reason, "Flaking Pixels".

During this period of trial and error, Bordeaux reduced five school guidance counselors to a state of gibbering catatonia and caused his high school principal to self-immolate in sheer despair. "The boy is a menace," said Harrison instants before his fiery but well-contained demise.

Government recruiters, on the other hand, noted Bordeaux's extraordinary motivational skills; later, they would attempt to plumb these skills for all they were worth.

After college, Bordeaux set his sights on a series of careers: political huckster; pharmacological beta tester, theological dominant. After tasting the relative savor of each of these, he entered wholeheartedly into the world of art-porn.

The field was wide open to someone with his particular complex of interests and ambitions. Until Bordeaux, few had explored the pornographic essence of vegetable matter; nor had anyone dared to contemplate interspecies necrophilia, except in moments of deeply private whimsy.

Many years later, the coupling of a live antelope with a dead cheerleader in a montage composed of slow deliquescent morphs would be considered trite. At best "a nod at early Bordeaux," in the words of one critic. But in the mid 25th Century, the notion was still fresh and ripe for exploitation.

Unfortunately, the novel thrills Bordeaux disseminated into the mass idea pool failed, after a season, to meet his own highly jaded criteria. He longed for new horizons, imaginative challenges requiring, pound for pound, more dry wit than wet antelope. He aspired to enlarge the empire of reality, to plant his own flag in the fractal chaos that was *vérité TV*.

The truth was few people at the top nursed any illusions about the efficacy of Moon Camp. The point was not to transform the campers into perfect, well-mannered models of American adolescence—concupiscent curds whipped into frothy factotums of poise.

No, that was not the point. Not at all. Putatively, yes, that was the goal—what they told the public. And yes, mechanisms were in place to achieve this goal. But regardless of the true outcome—whether, in fact, the girls learned to mend their ways or melted into grinning props with rictus smiles—Moon Camp had to be stage-managed at every point in its execution. There could be no room for error. No room for judgment calls in hindsight.

People believed what they saw beamed into their homes every night, and when they tuned in to the special feed documenting the day-to-day progress of these girls, they would see a miracle. Cursing, illicit drug use, promiscuous sexuality, rebellious attitudes: all these ills would fade before the public's eyes like the last twittering gleam of a burned-out smartbox. Rejects from the Later Protozoic Era. The transition from slumped and sullen sluts to perky, glass-eyed dolls would seem inevitable.

The old garden with its rotting vegetation and matted debris would shiver with the pulse of new life, as green, wholesome shoots pushed their way through, as healthy flowers beamed beneath the rays of a renewing sun. The Publicans had developed commercials, masterworks of propaganda capturing the spirit of which Moon Camp would be the physical embodiment.

The ads sang and shouted from cereal boxes to traffic lights, dominated billboards that towered over the downtown area of major cities, winked in subliminal flashes from the night sky, and infested dreams.

Many had begun to see the experiment at Moon Camp as the symbol of a new Renaissance. It could happen.

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Bordeaux called down to the lobby. "Send in Foxx."

Lisa Foxx wore a skintight blue-black PVC dress and high heels. Her eyes, outlined in kohl, flared batlike to a bundle of smart nerve fibers woven into hot dreads. She crossed her legs and sat down before Bordeaux's desk.

"Hey Roger," she said. "How are you? Seems like ages since we talked."

"It's been a while. Listen, what do you know about the Moon Camp experiment?"

Lisa smiled gently, her people-pleasing best. "It's something I wish I'd had as a girl." She sounded a lot like 21st Century icon, Buffy "Michelle" Gellar.

Roger clipped and lit a fresh cigar. "Are you serious?" he asked, forming two perfect smoke rings above his head. "You know that it's strictly from Sim City. You know, the Franz Quaffkah classic."

"Yeah, well, I don't know later Quaffkah like you. Or at least I can't just quote him off the top of my head, like you. Are you sure that's Quaffkah anyway?"

Something, sometimes a cognitive knot, blocked Foxx from understanding the idea. She regarded her former boss and lover with washed-out, crystal blue eyes.

"What do you mean? I think it's perfectly charming. Girls these days have no direction. They run wild like alley cats. Did you know that just this week, some scamps broke into my apartment, rewired the security system, and kidnapped my cat for some kind of satanic ritual?"

"The poor little thing hasn't been the same since. I think he's possessed, if you want to know. And not by the right kind of spirits."

Saying this, Lisa looked almost heartbreakingly sincere, like the southern belle she might have been. Long ago. That summer.

"It's hard, I agree," said Bordeaux, nodding. He'd always thought they had a weird psychic connection—or was it psycho? Didn't matter too much, because—his eyes alighted on her perfect breasts, the swell of her calves, the sculptural perfection of her clavicles, her spine wasn't too bad either, but he'd already had that; lovely fluid, like oyster juice.

"I mean, we all know that adolescents have an especially difficult time of it now. There's no moral guidance, no examples."

As these words bubbled from his mouth, as though decocted from the lips of a cartoon, he imagined them suspended there, a thick line drawn around, an arrow pointing to a text graphic: "Bullshit. All lies."

But nothing would come from having a conscience about it. But Lisa appeared to be buying. Apparently the old chemistry—or was it the old con job?—still worked.

"Here's the deal. I'm going to be auditioning cast members for a new Moon-based reality show. The thing is, the NAR contacted me and basically promised me big contracts for the rest of my career if I can make this thing work. Our cast will interface with the actual Moon campers. Hybridize like Jack Black and Dio."

"So they're plants?"

"Yeah right, like plants. Okay, plants. You see, our girls will be the shining examples of what the Moon Camp discipline is supposed to produce.

"Our cameras will stay on top of them from touchdown to their triumphal return to Earth. You'll interview them and so forth. Of course we'll have a soundtrack."

"Right, like fuzzy jazz, old school noise, maybe a little cybersplat?"

"Exactly. Kids really respond to imagery backed with some cool sounds. The stickiness factor, you know."

"That goes without saying. So, are you offering me a job, or just yanking my chain?"

"I love that you always get right down to the point, Lisa. Yes, a job it is. But a job with a lot of commitment. Ahem." Sometimes Bordeaux reminded himself of some sleazy used-car salesman in an old Prevac space opera.

"We'll have to set up shop on location, do traffic managing between the actors and the camp administrators, write the scripts in practically real time, and do damage control, of course.

"There's an interactive aspect we'll work in, where viewers can nominate their favorite campers in different categories. Our actors

have to blend right in. I mean, no outline traces, okay. Nothing escapes the wax, honey. Okay?"

Subliminal flesh of wild boys.

"Do you have a spec script?"

"Sure."

Bordeaux rifled in his desk, came back with a thousand-page hardcopy. "Check it out."

"This is pretty impressive," said Lisa gaily, leafing through the book. "You've got it broken down scene by scene, it looks like."

"Not that we're going to use all that. I just want to have an idea of what the parameters are. You know," he added suddenly, "I wish to speak about those. Sorry. Not to be forward."

Lisa brushed him off. "Right. So we're going to need some Earth footage, I mean for the 'before' aspect of things."

"Definitely. I think this is going to go really well." He stretched his hand over the desk. "Welcome aboard, once again!"

\*\*\*

Lisa Foxx came from a broken-down virtual village where the lines between "tastefully simulated" and "hyperplastic mindrot" had plainly collapsed. Situated in geographic space in a place called NeoCallie, the village was part of a civil planning experiment in which artificial environments were wedded to standing infrastructure. Or, as Lisa would put it at age sixteen, "Ohmigod!" By the age of twenty, however, Lisa had mastered the vital arts of makeup and elective skin grafting. She could remake herself after the templates of the most popular porn fantasies, Lisa could cry, coo and whimper on command. She could be anybody's fool. Everybody's Bellmer Sexpuppet. Break down her body into pixels, and rebuild it, moment by moment, as the sexual act came to a climax. Nobody did it better.

Inevitably, Foxx became Bordeaux's greatest star. Her die-hard fans knew her under many different rubrics—as an interplanetary dominatrix, a spy slut, a robotic slave, a sweating field hand amidst acres of brown bodies, *tout le monde* bent beneath prop whips.

Today Lisa Foxx sat behind a screen, trying to coordinate herself with her retro laptop, its teak inlays grinning with billions of nanobyte teeth. Bordeaux didn't make it easier to concentrate. While not actively massaging her, he was planting little butterfly kisses on her neck, looking for a tsunami on the other side of the world. As a result, Lisa's pleasure zones had begun the pre-launch sequence for interstellar overdrive.

"Roger, my dear, try to control yourself," she whispered weakly.

"I'm doing my best, Hon."

"Could we have the next victim—I mean personality. Please."

Samantha Regina strolled out on the set of virtual Moon Camp. She was chewing a wad of pheromone gum, listlessly tickling the artificial foliage, gratuitously showing off her shapely body. She had plenty to be proud of. And a lot to show off.

Samantha Regina was browned to perfection, her hair dark and curly, her large maroon eyes and full lips forming the word "sex" in the silent air like streaks of Vaseline on a mirror.

"Okay," said Lisa. "What are you doing?"

"I'm, I dunno," said Samantha listlessly. She walked over to a tree and began to peel her clothes off.

"This is getting me hot," said Lisa. "Roger?"

"Oh yeah, big time. Could we see some more flesh please?"

"More flesh, please."

"Yeah, whatever," said Samantha.

She pulled off her micropore N-shirt exposing, 38DD breasts and a nipple ring implant that shot off sparks on the half minute.

Roger's eyes widened. Then she wriggled out of her denim shorts into her shiny black satin panties. A faint difference in tone told Roger and Lisa that the panties were already soaked through.

Nice.

"We'll be continuing the audition back here," said Lisa gleefully.

"So does that mean I get the job?" said Samantha.

"Well, we'll have to see how you do on the uh, talent portion. Come back here. Don't be shy."

"Sure, whatever," said Samantha. She sensed a tension in the air. Not an unpleasant sensation, but one that warned her of imminent

binding, branding and spanking. If she was lucky, that is.

"Is she really like that, or is she just acting?" asked Roger in wonder.

"I don't know," said Lisa. "Let's ask her. Samantha darling, were you acting out there, or are you really that boring?"

Samantha looked at Lisa passively, then impishly; impassively.

"I don't know," she said, chomping away at the pheromone gum. But she was cracking a smile that she couldn't contain. "It's acting. But I draw on a lot of myself when I was younger."

"You draw on yourself. Cute. How old are you, exactly?" Lisa asked.

"Twenty-three."

"Perfect. Well come over here. Would you like a tincture? Something to smoke?"

"Sure, whatever," said Samantha; but she was openly smiling now.

"I could use something to smoke," said Lisa. "Roger, would you be a darling?"

Bordeaux reached into a false mahogany cabinet and retrieved some fresh cannabis sativa bud. "It's dwarf weed," he said. "With something else in it; I think LQ, but I can't be sure. Would you like to do the honors?" He motioned to Lisa.

"Why thank you, my dear." Lisa placed the bud on a tray on the coffee table and began to select a small portion to roll into a joint.

"I still prefer this method to vaporizing. Don't you agree?" she said, addressing Samantha.

Samantha's eyes flickered. "Oh yeah, I mean, vaporizing is great, but yeah." She preferred the vapor, but she was a guest here. And, if she played her cards right, a virtual employee of Bordeaux Enterprises, which meant, for all practical purposes, a Suprane star. A slut. A star. A girl with an open flycar. Or so the commercial went.

Lisa flamed up the joint, inhaled deeply. Her eyes sparkled.

"It's good, Roger. I mean it's really good. Samantha?"

Samantha nodded, took a hit. "You're right, it is good." She started to cough a little. Damn, she wished she had a vaporizer on hand.

"So," said Bordeaux, sidling closer. "We like you. Am I right, Lisa?"

Lisa nodded. Her collar and cheeks had flushed a trickle of pink. "We like," she said. She coughed.

"Sorry, I must have swallowed a hairball or something." Lisa's hand froze in the air. She recovered. Quick grin, lots of teeth. "We want to make sure that you're comfortable in the uh, position. You're going to be working very closely with these girls. And they're not stupid. In fact, despite appearances, these are some extremely sharp young ladies. So we're going to be doing a little one-on-one exercise."

"Suit yourself," said Samantha, nodding through a mouthful of bubbly giggles.

"That's the spirit. I like your sense of adventure. Now hold very still."

Bordeaux placed a thumb and forefinger on both of Samantha's nipples. And slowly, expertly, twisted.

"Does that hurt?"

"Uh, no, I guess it tickles a little."

"Lisa?"

Lisa left the room and returned with a pair of tongs.

"We want to test your pain/pleasure threshold," said Bordeaux. His breathing was getting shorter. Samantha volunteered: hands behind her back.

"Excellent. Lisa, would you do the honors?"

Lisa obliged, binding Samantha's hands behind her in the chair. "Is that tight enough? I don't want you to get loose." Samantha nodded.

"With the gag, or without?"

Samantha nodded. Lisa smiled. "I guess that means yes." She procured a leather bit from the cycling rack that ran across the length of the dresser.

"This will hurt a little," she said after securing the gag.

Then she picked up the tongs.

# SEVEN

This labris of death. A slim, bronzed, long-legged woman lies facedown in the shallows. Over the next few hours the sandbank on which her head rests erodes, shifted and resettled by the constant lapping of the waves, opaque as a thick, lazy blue ink. Her head sinks back into the current.

Wafted by trickles of warm current, her body slumps onto her back, exposing a tableau of extreme damage. Her ribcage has been stripped to the bone. A long savage wound clears the flesh up to her neck—hideously excavated.

She exudes the sickly sweet odor of carrion, a fetid aroma mingled with tanning lotion, a perfume carried away by ocean breezes that turn it simply sweet. Seagulls settle from time to time, using her body as a perch, before ascending into the cloudless sky.

The sun beats down relentlessly. An exterminating angel.

The woman is completely naked except for the scraps of black bikini bottoms that cling to her ass like shreds of jellyfish. Sharp, high cheekbones and an aristocratic nose show her to have been a very beautiful woman, come to a nasty end.

Her mass of thick, raven black hair provides a home for crabs. The left eye is a floating red mass, the eyeball extruded from the socket on a delicate optic nerve, while the cheek and parts of the lower lip have been forcibly torn away exposing the grinning skull beneath.

The final expression seared on her ruined face is one of horror and anguish.

She clutches something in her hand like a protective talisman: the strap of a Guccette knockoff handbag. The bag itself has long disgorged its contents into the sea—lipstick, hose, cigarettes, love letters, spermicidal jelly, tokens for the New Paris subway; an AllCard.

Down a crest of sand that leads diagonally into the water, hundreds of footprints converge, indentations filled with a dark stain.

Up the crest of sand going north, a mass of footprints, hundreds more footprints, as from a stampede, triangulate upon a red tent.

The sun pierces the fabric of the tent so a shadowy, frozen figure becomes silhouetted against it, head down and clutching its knees like an Inca mummy. The tent is ripped in ragged shreds, rent as though by the claws of beasts.

Fifty yards above this scene, a man lies against the wall of a changing room, glassy eyes fixed on a swarm of graffiti. His intestines have been ripped out with great force, his left leg rudely severed, the stump matted with a black gloss of ants.

The thick, congealed pool of blood in which he lies has attracted a horde of gnats. Beside him the shattered remains of a vircher cam yawn open like a carcass, slicked with blood and caressed by an unknown, transparent jelly.

A shattered slate, with the legend "Blue Apocalypse" scrawled on it in Magic Marker, sits in his gnarled hands.

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Heads explode live in surround sound. Violet arterial blood shoots out of bodies turned into life-gushing sprinkler systems. Zombies run amok in the deep blue Nouvelle Caribe, carving body parts out like wedding cake. They bear aloft platters of golden breasts smeared with sunscreen and vomit. Waterlogged undead throng the lobby of *Hotel L'Age D'Or*, reducing guests to crimson smears. Porno stars dripping mascara and eye matter pop the head of the Maitre D' like it is a piñata, wrench off his arms and masturbate themselves senseless with the frozen fists. Eurotrash flop around on the deep-piled carpet, heaving intestines out their mouths like the aftermath of some terrible coke binge. Club Med turns into Club Dead.

\*\*\*

Deep in the jungles of New Salvador, Dr Armando Castillo plunges his hand knuckle-deep in the native woman's splayed womb. He retrieves a biopsy sample. It is a pinkish gray lump of flesh, the size of a walnut. Usually slick with pomade and neatly coiffed, the

doctor's hair is soaked with perspiration, matted on his head like algae.

"Hot box," he observes to no one in particular, exposing jagged, irregular teeth as he grins at his own little joke. He deeply inhales the rank miasma rising from the woman's groin. This subject has been uncooperative, requiring restraint with duct tape and gauze. She makes muffled sobbing noises.

Jars of mutated embryos watch the good doctor from creaking shelves. Gobs of black rot cling to every exposed surface of the operating room. Cicadas chirp in the still, clear night surrounding the Army/CIA compound.

The long, gray building is surrounded by a fifty foot perimeter wall, slotted for armed sentries: their orders are to shoot all unauthorized personnel. A searchlight scours the night sky for trespassers. None are found. Even so, for the sake of everybody's comfort, direct fusion weapons decimate the countryside in a hundred foot circumference. Just like 'Nam.

"Is it good, Señor Doctor?" asks his trusty assistant, Igor Montalban.

Montalban bears a tray of syringes filled with grayish sperm.

"I'm afraid it's not soup yet, Igor, as we say," drawls the doctor, plunging the hypodermic full of potassium cyanide deep in the woman's left arm.

She writhes against her restraints and lets loose one horrible gasp before expiring.

"Oh, you'll have to log this one too—time of death, 1600 hours. Frankly, I think it was her attitude that made the experiment fail. Fetal mutation is not possible in every instance. It takes a certain will."

"I thought we were learning how to prevent the mutations, Señor?"

"Don't talk back to me, dammit. And bring the morphine. We may have an, uh, sudden attack of los nervios." Igor shuffles away with the plate of syringes, wearing a white blood-spattered lab coat and black-rimmed spectacles. He has a slight limp, only apparent when he has to move fast.

"And make it snappy," adds the doctor. Igor tosses the syringes in a broom closet and limps rapidly away.

\*\*\*

Through a long, deliberate derangement of the senses, super director Roger Bordeaux has made himself sensitive not just to things and the shapes of things, but more importantly, to the delicate aura they exude; their hum.

Midway through film school, Bordeaux snapped. At least, so his critics contended. He began to actually see the energy whorls, the molecular dance of people and objects swirling, colliding and entwining, and dropped out when his professors dismissed him as a lunatic. Ironically, it has been this very mania that has won him international acclaim.

As a director he is no great auteur; not in the way he imagines, anyway. But he has an uncanny knack for bringing talent together. He is a catalyst for strange chemistries of people and décor, of light, echo and color. His eyelids fall like shutters, freezing and fixing moments, editing constantly.

Lisa Foxx: his star. Tall, tempestuous, a woman who loves to play the diva, who imagines herself to be glamorous in a way that fools more than the camera. She touches Roger's neck, curls her fingers through platinum white hair. He shifts his head away, distractedly.

"Just try it," he says.

Lisa glances at the vial he has thrust into her hand. A tangerine-colored rock rests on the bottom of the glass like some unheimlich coral. She shakes it in her ear like a maraca. "If you say," flirtatiously, in one smooth motion dropping the vial into her handbag and spinning in the air as though doing the tango with an imaginary partner.

Roger observes her gyrating body with fish eyes.

"Is this your way of bribing me for doing another movie with you when we're supposed to be on holiday?"

He purses his lips but says nothing. She pats his chest, a black N-shirt inscribed with the legend in slanted white cursive: "Death is a

Cliché".

"If you say, Maestro."

Roger resembles a mannequin in a department store. Some people find him intensely creepy, but even they agree that he's a genius. He is here in this deluxe hotel on the Cote D'Azure to shoot, on the cheap as always, a zombie porno that he has been calling *Blue Apocalypse*.

The idea was to use his stock company of actors and film them interacting with completely oblivious hotel guests, making his stars up as zombies, letting them loose with a head full of weird drugs to fuck everything in sight.

In the holopape *Shoexpress* he called the process: "Robert Altman meets Joe D'Amato, a kind of zombie *vérité*." His critics called it crap, a kind of excrement.

Didn't matter. Bordeaux was on top of his game, although he was never quite able to explain his program. Now this defect in an otherwise deeply articulate man could only be laid at the feet of one thing. Well, two things: willed oblivion being one. And two, well hell, if you willed oblivion, who needs a second wish? At least, that's how they said it back in the neighborhood.

\*\*\*

Dr Castillo watches through a morphine haze as the patient's eyes explode. She has just been delivered of a five pound, two-headed baby boy already equipped with twin sets of razor-edged shark teeth.

"Madre de Dios! Isn't there any way of keeping the eyeball explosions down to a minimum?" he asks the nurse in a tone like dripping honey, mashing his cigar out on the burn-scared lab table.

She raises her head from the bucket where she has been puking with great violence. "I suppose it's inevitable, Señor Doctor," she says, her body contracting in agonizing spasms. "The eyeballs, they... cannot take the strain!" She decorously wipes a yellow chunk of vomit from her chin with a sterile pad.

"Still, look at the beautiful results. It's like—poetry!"

Dr Castillo puts his eye to the microscope again where the cells are dividing in ways nature never intended. Time slows to an elaborate drip. Donning lead-lined gloves, he takes a piece of biopsy sample and dips it in the radioactive isotope, then looks at the strain again under the lens. "It's alive," he says. "It's alive!" (That old Colin Frye number used to drive 'em mad at med school, so he says it whenever he gets the chance.)

The doctor takes an eyedropper and obtains a dose of the new virus that he has suspended in saline. He transfers the virus to a collagen bed, where the cells split with alarming velocity. After a few hours he takes the new batch of virus and places it in a glass jar, where it soon attains the consistency of crystal, the color tangerine.

\*\*\*

It is the expressed policy of Dr Armando Castillo, known to his enemies as Mengele, Jr, that a doctor can only come to understand the exact properties of human life by killing a few. He has been brought here to this secret compound in the heart of New Salvador's famous national park, El Imposible, as part of a bio-weapons project.

The shadowy figures behind the project, the ones who always let handpicked puppets do their PR for them, are thought to be among those responsible for the infamous MK-ULTRA experiments on Earth Prime during the 1960s and 1970s.

The official word on MK-ULTRA is that it's history, a relic of the First Cold War, but it continues unfettered in spooky, clandestine shops.

For years, the NAR Army attempted to perfect the ultimate biological weapon, an undead crew of soldiers who could battle in any terrain, in any weather, and even underwater—supposedly a variation on the Nazi shock troops known as Der Todens Korps.

Through a sustained process of debauchery, Castillo managed to isolate a strain of virus with psychoactive properties known on the street as Liquex, also known officially as virus B-24. This virus met the criteria set up by the Army, but it had devastating side effects.

The viral drug plays havoc with DNA, slicing it to ribbons and reconnecting it in unlikely ways with RNA. It is extremely addictive and produces such intense euphoria for most users that the permanent side effect of becoming a slush-brained, cannibalistic zombie doesn't even enter the equation.

B-24 comes on like bad speed and for a few minutes there you think you've been burned. Someone has rudely introduced 2,000 volts of raw electric current into your spinal column, and you begin to shiver, shake and twist like a Texas neocon getting the chair. Neon graffiti swims before your eyes, and your skull feels like it is radiating some huge incandescent aura. You are lightbulb head, blinking on and off to a dark and stealthy beat.

This is not good, you think, but before that negative thought has time to sink in, a second phase arrives. Time becomes indefinitely prolonged, oozing out along a long, thin rope, as the fractions of a second it would take to examine some speck on the wallpaper now encompass aeons.

If you have lit any candles or incense in preparation for the trip, they will provide hours of enchanting eye candy. But you will have no time to examine the whorls and twists of the flames as they become grinning orange skulls, nor will you be left any leisure to inspect the columns of incense smoke as they wrap themselves into Rococo licorice twists. For suddenly the hunger kicks in, and it is the hunger that every LQ addict recognizes as the drug's defining element. Every time is dinnertime.

\*\*\*

The bed behind him begins to creak. "Nurse?" says Dr Castillo, his voice suddenly querulous. But she has long since vanished.

"Oh, shit!"

Castillo grabs a scalpel for self-defense. Too late, however, to evade the attack of the hideous mutant infant, whose mother has thrown him across the room still attached to the umbilical cord. The cord reels out, a slick pink cable.

The infant wreaks two-headed carnage, gobbling the doctor's eyeballs as though they were candy. The mother rears up, attacks him from behind with his own scalpel, twisting his arm backward with superhuman strength and driving the scalpel deep into his scrotal sac.

Castillo howls from the spurting red cavern of his face. The patient grabs for the gray testicles, snacks on them, reaches for the flabby penis with a brown, gnarled hand. Devours it like an appetizer.

Still hungry, the baby buries his heads in the doctor's stomach and draws out his intestines like a rope of sausages.

His nerves mummified from the overdose of morphine, Dr Castillo crawls away from the zombie mother and son. He leaves a slick trail of gastrointestinal juice on the stained white tile of the laboratory.

A team of biohazard specialists in goggles and full body suits storm into the room with flamethrowers. Fetal heads boil and turn black in their specimen bottles, which explode and send a shower of glass, formaldehyde and mutant baby corpses into the orange holocaust.

Dr Castillo is not among the dead.

A worried-looking military man with a large, pale forehead appears in the closed circuit TV monitors perched above the lab. His face multiplies across the monitors like a fly's eye view.

"I think we have a situation here," he says, clearing his throat and spitting a wad of green phlegm into his handkerchief. "A definite situation."

A short civilian with exophthalmic eyes appears beside him, dressed in a sparkling white lab coat. "Usual containment protocol, General?"

"Sound the alarms!" General Hawkins commands into his headset. "I was afraid this would happen," he tells the civilian. "The doctor's practices were unsound, and not only from a moral point of view. Still, he did succeed with the B-24 virus."

Klaxons screech from treetops, exciting a frenzy from the rhesus monkeys who have been infected with the virus. They bend the bars of their cages like soda straws and scurry yowling through the compound, clawing and biting the soldiers they come across.

"I'm afraid we'll have to use the napalm," says the general. He sweeps aside the civilian's protest that he can't napalm a plant and

animal sanctuary, calls in a rescue helicopter and clammers aboard as the tree line explodes, tracing a wreath of white phosphorescence around the compound.

Dying men scream and claw the air after the escaping Black Hawk as the napalm burns through their skin like acid.

"Take us with you," they cry. The general averts his eyes. "There was a... situation," he explains to the pilot. "Unavoidable. We had to take extreme precautions."

"Yes, sir," says the pilot from behind a full facemask. "Here, you should put this on. You were able to retrieve some of the virus though, weren't you?"

Strapping on a mask, General Hawkins retrieves the vial of tangerine-colored crystal from his right pants pocket. "Fucking A I was. Want a hit?"

\*\*\*

Lisa slipped into the elevator stabbed the sixth floor button with an elegant, black-laced finger. The stairs didn't look attractive to her; there were too many of them, the carpet woven with a diamond-shaped red and gold pattern that made her dizzy and slightly nauseated, and landing after landing with the same view of the crystal Nouvelle Caribe.

What she wanted was to recreate before the press conference; those things took a lot out of her. She felt in her purse for the vial, a sudden frantic moment scrambling through lipsticks and skin balms; clutched the sleek glass—good.

A young porter, maybe eighteen or nineteen, stoically guarded a silver bucket, which held two green bottles of champagne immersed in ice. His neck, rising from an orange polo shirt, was thick, muscled and tanned, and his hands were big and capable-looking. Always a good sign.

The porter avoided direct eye contact, but peeped at her covertly from the side. Lisa obviously made him uncomfortable—she had this effect on men. Something about beautiful women short-circuiting the guy's sense of a future. At least, that's what she'd read in the pop

psychology magazine. Just one look at a hotty, the article had said, stunned them like a poleaxed cow.

It was useful to know.

"Do you recognize me?" she asked.

He kept his head down but softly answered, "I'm not sure." She leaned against the elevator wall and lifted up her arm high. If he wanted a peek he would have it.

He wasn't sure? What, was he gay? Whatever he was, she'd have to be the one to initiate contact.

"I'm a movie star," she said. "Starlet. Maybe you've seen some of my vids."

At this, he turned and got a good look. "Oui, mademoiselle," he said. The question between them hinged on which of her films he had actually seen. Had he watched the early pornos on fractal cable, the quicky à la Jess Franco, the art-slut things she did with Bordeaux? How had he watched her, in what position, maybe rubbing himself to a feverish climax...

"You did—qu'est que on dit—the zombie films?"

"Yes, that would be me," she said, laughing.

"Yes, of course I've seen you. Have you come here for the convention?"

"Yes. It was supposed to be a little vacation, but my director—the man isn't human, I tell you. He doesn't sleep. Or maybe he sleeps like a cow, standing up."

The porter smiled. She'd broken the ice. "So, are you taking that to a party?"

"Yes, a little, what you call, shindig," he said.

"Want to call it a day and come up to my suite?"

He turned beet red. "Well, of course that is very flattering, but my boss..."

"Leave it all to me," she said with silky confidence. "I think I can handle your boss."

Once in her room, she took all the magazines—*Fangoth*, *Cinefantom*, *Video Logos*—off the bed and threw them onto a spare chair. "Make yourself comfortable," she said. "Pour us some champagne. I'm going to go wash up."

She wondered if this were the thrill of his young life. Probably not. But then, he was so shy...

\*\*\*

Once clear of the ring of napalm, the Black Hawk leveled to an altitude barely scraping the tips of the trees and the lush jungle foliage.

A blue puff of smoke issued from the chopper's engine block. The bird rocked perilously back and forth as the two men struggled for the controls.

The general smacked the pilot against the instrument panel. The chopper flipped ninety degrees.

He pulled the pilot limp off the panel.

The chopper righted itself.

The pilot's eyes had imploded, leaving a trail of dark brown sludge on his fatigues; curiously, his small, round glasses still stuck to his nose. The general, eyes pulsing like red diodes, slung the slumped carcass of the pilot into the back of the Black Hawk.

General Hawkins used to fly these puppies back in the day, back in the First Microsoft Conflict, though his skills had become rusty. Atavisms of his neural architecture allowed him to pilot the chopper.

After a fashion. A gay fashion, acutually.

Hawkins realized too late that the pilot had reanimated.

The pilot lurched up in his seat and plunged at the general, tearing at his neck flesh with newly razor-sharp teeth.

The engine shrieked and the chopper began its descent into the kaleidoscopic green.

Spraying blood, the general backhanded him, but the pilot renewed his attack. He took a nine inch hunting knife from a leg pocket and thrust it into the nape of the general's neck, with such force that it exited the mouth.

The general made a guttural, gurgling noise from his shattered trachea as he clutched his throat, spewing crimson foam.

The copter veered into the jungle on a sharp diagonal, so low that the flying blades hit thick, rubbery vines.

The remains of an ancient, moss-laden structure had become visible, the ruins of a Mayan temple—an arch formed between two rocks.

The general's head hung on a ragged edge of flesh, his neck spurting like a fountain.

The head made a one hundred and eighty degree turn to the sound of cracking tendons, muscle and bone. He head butted the pilot, pulled the hunting knife out of the back of his neck—it shrieked against the bone—and stabbed the pilot in the throat.

The Black Hawk made a harsh, high winnying noise. The prop blades splintered on descent, choked with vine.

Wound yards and yard of vine, weaving a green burial gown.

The pilot clutched his throat, spurting hot jets of blood. He fell forward out the door and plunged down to the jungle floor, pulling coils of vine down with him.

General Hawkins unsteadily steered the copter through a gap in the foliage and plunged it headfirst into a thicket of sharp, thorny plants.

The Mayan structure loomed overhead. A bank of steam curled around it like a cat.

Or a question mark.

He sat for a moment in the cockpit and then began to scour all available surfaces for the B-24. The general's torso, his jacket rent, had transformed into a map of dark red splotches. He could no longer see his own proportions. His pale, misting eyes followed the wound routes as though they belonged to someone else.

"Now..." Hawkins managed to collect a small pile of the orange stuff. He snorted it off a clean space on his mangled forearm.

"Damn, that's good shit," he said in a voice like grunting fog.

\*\*\*

Lisa sat in the bathroom with the shower water running, warming it to a perfect consistency. She examined herself. Still looking good, she thought. Maybe she should do a commercial for that skin cream she always carried around. Her eyebrows were slightly arched, the

nose small and rising slightly at the tip. A luxurious head of strawberry blonde hair collected on her shoulders.

Whistling, she took out her compact mirror and placed it on the sink, then retrieved the vial with the mysterious rock. She used a razor blade to chop the tangerine rock into a small orange pile, then the blade's edge to form two perfect lines. She decided to do one and see how she felt; it was the wisest thing with new drugs.

She took out her favorite tooter, a tube of platinum some old boyfriend had given her—he'd even had her initials engraved on it! Smiling with the thoughts of how much she'd escaped, rural NeoCallie with its thick, burning video brush and crowds of yahoos, she quickly took a hit.

Wiping her nose delicately with the edge of a pocket hankie, she wondered exactly what she had just ingested. Within thirty seconds her face became rubbery, yet not in a dense opiate way.

It was more like she could feel things, feel them intensely. The steady rhythms of her heart and lungs struck her as a mighty machinery. There was a sudden grandeur, a feeling of liquid pleasure roaring through her veins.

She hoped the porter was getting himself ready for her. Lisa felt like doing one thing and one thing only: fucking. It was good for her, it was necessary, and frankly, she couldn't see beyond it.

After showering, she tucked herself into a violet terrycloth robe and walked into the bedroom.

The porter had undressed except for his socks and underwear—black nanopore briefs—and was staring at the TV. He'd popped in one of her holos and was watching with awe as she sped through the dense foliage of a Central American jungle, entirely naked, pursued by a slavering horde of zombies.

"Good," she said. "You found *Mondo Holocausto Zombi*. Did you know you couldn't even get that in New Anglia? They called it a 'holovid nasty business'—at least up until recently. Still, they had to cut all the good stuff out. This is the uncut version."

Speaking of cut or uncut, Lisa wondered about the porter's status in that regard. She gently pushed him back against the pillows and straddled him, seeking his mouth with her own.

She slipped him through his black briefs and looked down. "Oh, yummy."

Lisa pulled the briefs down over the porter's legs and kissed her way down his chest, his stomach...

He began to moan and sigh.

"I want you so badly," she said. "What was your name again?"

"Henri," said the porter, his hands closing over her head gently. "Oh God, that feels so good," she said. "Fuck me, Henri. Fuck me!"

Henri turned her over. Got on top.

Her hips arched to meet his, and they reached the zone, union, a great dissolving fucking machine with no beginning and no end. As his breath came faster and faster and she could tell he was going to explode very soon, she said, "I want you to do something for me."

"Mademoiselle?"

"Eat me. Please."

They reversed positions again. Henri licked from her belly button down to the sopping jewel.

"Oh, you're killing me! I can't stand it! What's your major in college. Torture?"

Lisa closed her thighs around his head and played with his lank brown hair, twisting it between her fingers.

He was good, she had to admit. Very good. She could easily come then, but the drug had somehow postponed the orgasmic release so that it shimmered through the entire act.

Her fingers sought his neck, his ears, felt behind them. For a second there... Yes, she could see the veins in his head, in his marble shoulders, his chest, his ass; it was as though he were transparent.

And creeping up inside her like a rattler about to strike: the hunger. As he worked his tongue, she began to wonder if it wouldn't be more efficient to remove the head from his restraining carapace, to wrench it one hundred and eighty degrees in easy twist-off fashion. She bucked against his mouth. She wanted him inside her, all the way inside her. She wanted to eat him.

For a second she caught the action unrolling on the holovid. A group of New Salvadoran revolutionaries had kidnapped her and

were holding her in a cage. The one they called El Jefe strolled back and forth in front of the cage with a crop whip.

Suddenly the cry came up behind him: "Zombies!"

Close-up on El Jefe laughing, his fake handlebar moustache becoming unglued on the right. A rotten hand reached for his shoulder; he turned around to confront the living dead. Meanwhile, Lisa had opened the cage with keys she had stolen and concealed in her cheek. She ran back into the jungle as fast as she could, wearing little more than she'd arrived with.

The zombies swarmed the compound and dined under a banner that read: "Viva La Libertad!"

\*\*\*

Hawkins peeps out of the cockpit and finds himself staring into the eyes of a jaguar. The jaguar leaps for the general who plunges his right arm straight into the cat's mouth.

The animal seizes and rents the limb, chewing it off. Hawkins fountains blood and cries for his suddenly phantom limb.

The jaguar rushes off into the jungle bearing its flopping trophy, which still wears a Rolex.

The general follows: "Here kitty, kitty..."

The general overtakes the cat, leaps on his back. They roll over and over. Finally, the general gets the upper hand, swoops in and takes a giant bite of flesh and fur. The cat shrieks and begins running again, streaking the vines with his blood.

The general pounces on the cat again. They both go down.

Suddenly, the pilot appears behind the general. He hoists the general off the cat one-handed and throws him against the spiky plants. The pilot gorges himself on the jaguar. A collared anteater climbs further up his tree for safety, watching the fight.

In a few hours the jungle is overrun by zombie animals, the cries and shrieks of the dead, dying and wounded sounding a dissonant chorus.

\*\*\*

Bordeaux checked his watch. Where was his leading lady, anyway? He hoped she hadn't done something foolish. Such as, say, seduce the hotel porter and remove his head in a kind of drug-crazed, masturbatory fit.

All the major genre periodicals were represented at the press conference, row after row of foldout chairs bearing the grim and largely portly bodies of reporters and editors.

*Darksider* was there, of course, and *Fangoth*. *Bizarrie* was represented; even the NAR film theory magazine *Cinereview*.

Bordeaux respected *Cinereview* for its outstanding, tasteful coverage of art films, but he hated their representative critic, Barnard Holmes. Barnard had a PhD in art criticism from New Harvard and was a great believer in mimesis, which is why he loathed Bordeaux. He never missed a press conference with the director, nor did he miss the opportunity to tell the maestro exactly what he thought of his work. It was almost a sadistic game.

After fielding questions from the actual genre magazines, Bordeaux took the inevitable query from Mr Holmes.

Holmes usually signaled his wish to speak by clearing his throat and wiping the copious sweat from his forehead. Bordeaux nodded. Holmes opened his pink, fat maw.

"I don't see in any way, you know, that you can possibly justify these films. And I'm not just talking about taste; though taste, I regret to say, no more serves as an index of anything anymore. There's the whole aesthetic principal, formalism of course."

Nobody really understood what Holmes was talking about, but he said it with an intensity and tone of intellectual rigor that perfectly mimicked lucidity, somehow. "Formalism, and, you know. But the zombies. Where is the verisimilitude? The mirror up to nature? There's Romero and *Dawn of the Dead*, of course, which is quite good and really a metaphor for the consumerist impulse that is 'eating up' if you will, Western culture wholesale, in a Marxist sense, of course, and even in a purely limited physical sense, zombies—well, they're nothing to fear, because, look, has anybody ever seen a zombie?"

A steady pounding had begun on the doors leading to the conference room, as of hundreds of fists slammed with great force. "Ah," Holmes said. "La tempête qui batte!"

\*\*\*

Lisa sat down on the bed and took a sip of the champagne. Not bad, a little flat, she thought. She turned around to see Henri's head lying on the pillows.

Just his head. The rest of his body, that is the torso, was nowhere to be seen. A dark brown stain had completely soaked through the bed sheet.

Lisa's brain felt as if a lightning storm had hit it. She remembered through a thick fog cover that when he climaxed, she'd gotten excited, started smacking him around. The insatiable hunger she felt for him in her loins had traveled to her stomach, and she wanted to eat him.

Literally.

The rest was just screaming and her having to gag him with a pillowcase and carve great portions out of his thighs and stomach with her teeth and nail files. The rest was just his head between her legs and her exerting extreme pressure with her thighs and ripping off the head and sort of looking at it with its surprised, blank stare, arranging it on the pillows and trying it out in different environments—the bathroom, the closet, on top of the TV. It had all seemed perfectly natural, and as she did it she felt such supreme control, more control than she ever felt on a movie set.

Life was good. Even the head seemed to agree with her perspective.

\*\*\*

The doors to the conference room shook, bulged and splintered. Lisa Foxx stood at the head of a legion of gray, green, slathering, frothing, hungry zombies. There were dark smudges around her eyes. Her lips and cheeks were smeared with blood.

"I say," said Holmes, beads of sweat popping out of his forehead. "Is this some sort of joke? Because I really don't see the point."

Flickering on the screen as the zombies surround the critic for *Cinreview* and begin to dine on his innards, this tableau of death. A slim, bronzed, long-legged woman lay facedown in the shallows. Over the next few hours, the sandbank on which her head rest eroded. It was shifted and resettled by the constant lapping of the waves, opaque as a thick, lazy blue ink. Her head sank back into the current.

\*\*\*

Lisa Foxx removed her vircher headgear and sat back heavily in her chair. Reliving her first exploits with Bordeaux was one thing, but a creepy, nightmarish quality had been injected into her memories since she last visited.

Something was very, very wrong with this picture.

# EIGHT

Trust is never a given in human relationships. It is something accreted over time, a slow drip, the result of many, many contracts drawn between individuals. Performed to the letter. At no point does trust become a tangible thing, a stable reality by which to anchor the self. At most, it's a provisional reference point; the marker for a highway detour that you hope will not send you into a blind alley. Or barbed wire. Or a cluster of dirty bombs.

Sometimes even state-designed, taxpayer-supported markers will not save you. Even when they are sanctioned by every check and measure a democracy can summon.

Sadly, the New American Republic stopped calling itself a democracy many centuries ago. Long before the Great Evacuation.

The Constitution remained, of course. All seven copies, a thing venerated under glass, sworn to in the service of laws that violated its very essence. It remained the most significant prop around.

The Statue of NeoLiberty stood proud as well, lighting the passage of ships into a place called simply York. Its tearless retina took pictures it could prove, note of all pretenders to citizenship, documenting immigrants down to the last strand of DNA in their genetic signatures.

The passenger subspace trawler *Pantera* slid past the twittering torch of Lady NeoLiberty and the proud facades of the New World Trade Centers. Strobing firework displays constructed themselves from water vapor.

At a forward window, Mischa and April watched in awe.

"How cute!" said April.

Mischa nodded. "Stellar cute."

April curled herself into Mischa's arms. Mischa wrapped herself around her friend.

Among other nice, soft, wintry things, April smelled like apple and spices. Good things to eat. Ha! (With a well-known, catlike sinister giggle.)

From viewstations studded with crytoglyphic biosoft ports, the Moon Campers on board the *Pantera* admired the architectural wizardry that transformed large pieces of Earth II into a buffed-up simulacrum of Earth Prime.

Only better and more efficient. Less of the cumbersome human element.

"Check it out," said Mischa.

"What?"

"Lady NeoLiberty has something new on her tablet."

"Oh yeah? What's it say?"

"I don't know," said Mischa, giggling. "Shit, it's kind of hard to read."

"Okay, I think I see it now."

"It says, 'Give us your poor, your unvarnished, your tactless offspring yearning to breathe crap' something, blah blah."

"It does not!"

"Well, you look at it."

April looked. On the tablet, obscure cryptoglyphics burst into wiry streaks and closed in on themselves. Isolated, temporarily. Returned the user to the vendor.

"I don't know, sweetie. It keeps changing. One second it looks like letters, then the letters turn into some kinda funny eye candy. Like, I don't know, Mayan hieroglyphics or something."

"Yeah? Where do you get that shit?"

"Dude, you were the one who told me about Mayan hieroglyphics."

Mischa smelled warm. Sweet. Soft.

April nuzzled.

"Wanna make out?"

"Oh well. If you insist." Mischa smiled.

She leaned in and planted a warm, supple kiss on her best friend's lips.

"Damn, girl. You kiss good!" April squealed.

"More where that came from, honey."

April rolled her head back, sighed. "Maybe this won't be such an ass-smelling trip after all."

\*\*\*

For the men and women who designed Moon Camp Americana, trust, too, was a simulacrum, a designer drug. The girls entrusted to their care represented the cream of an affluent crust, and required special handling.

Wary and cyber-sophisticated as the girls might be, they were still girls. Prone to a girl's own perceptual lacunae. If all went well, they wouldn't see the trap for what it was until they were firmly sealed inside. Context cut off. Discarded. Like a strand of junk DNA.

For the first two weeks, all was fun and games, parties and permissiveness. Quietly, the machines scouted, the emulator programs ran diagnostics, and a graph mapped out every unladylike flaw the girls displayed.

Before their behavior could be modified, there had to be behavior to observe. To codify, quantitate and feed into a syntheopian model. The sims became an all-important factor. Quality control was key.

Much like the ID tags.

As the girls walked down the runway into the artificially controlled environment of the Moon Camp biodome, nurses in blue PVC administered a syringe of precautionary medication". These were thermal sensors that emitted microbursts of short-wave activity, tracking the girls wherever they went. Whatever they did.

Whomever they did.

The sensors were nanomachines, injected right into the bloodstream. Like a rejected suitor, they responded harshly to any resistance.

Chopping the girls into tiny bits.

Hopefully, none of the girls would try to rid themselves of the sensors. If they even guessed at the true nature of the medication. *Mutatis mutandis*. Ladybugkillers.

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Clarissa paused at the turnstile. The girl with the rock and roll eyes.

"What the hell do you think they gave us, anyway?"

Wendy shrugged. "I don't know. Some kind of meds, I guess."

"But you know it's not that."

"What else could it be? Fucking cookie cutters?"

"I'm surprised at you, Wendy. You're always on top of this kind of deal. Are you faking, or just plain scared?"

"I just don't want to think about it, okay? We've been through so much already. Now I just want to close my eyes, tune out my brain. Enjoy some camping."

"I suppose." Clarissa looked bemused.

"Well, what do you think it is?"

"Probably an ID tag," Clarissa said.

"Or something more insidious."

"What, cookie cutters? Oh my God!"

"I don't want to sound paranoid, but yeah. Something along those lines."

"Dude, we are very far from being destroyed by nanomachines. Think of the elections, right?"

"Our folks just want us out of their raggedy, aged ass hair. It's probably just some kind of sedative."

"I hope so," said Clarissa. "I really fucking hope so."

They walked out into a gallery swathed with plastic.

Down a long corridor, NeoBabylonian sphinxes stood guard with blinking LED eyes.

Overhead, a long banner unfurled. The words "Welcome to Moon Camp Americana" scrolled out at ten second increments.

Followed shortly by, "Enjoy a Blue Death."

"Where are the boys?" Wendy asked. "This Vortex shit is really turning my stomach."

"Boys? Where's your slave, April?"

"Oh." Wendy grinned. "I'm sure she's coming along any moment now."

She looked around. "April?"

April separated from the shadow of the closest sphinx. She looked odd and mysterious. The perfect slave.

"Yes mistress."

"Good. Clarissa and I were just inquiring where the boys are."

"I don't know. But check this out," April said. "There's stairs beneath these things."

"The what, birds?"

"They're not birds, they're sphinxes. Remember in lit class when we read about Oedipus?"

"Yeah, that was an eye opening experience."

"Ha ha. Seriously though, I wonder what's under these things?"

"Well, we'll just have to go exploring, shan't we."

\*\*\*

"A wise man once said..." Dr Castillo raised a hand for silence. "A wise man once said that all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Coughing. Restless shifting in seats. The natives were getting testy and Castillo was only twenty minutes into the thing.

"Well, the good men have done nothing, and now is the time to reap the whirlwind."

A single cough.

"That whirlwind being the rushing vortex of sound that permeates our ears every time we watch the news, whenever we read a holopape. As the poet Baudelaire once put it, 'I hear the winds of the wings of madness. Madness, because our interplanetary peace is at stake. Madness. Because when terrorism hits a nearby solar system, how long can we wait before it reaches our beloved New Earth? Before I took on this assignment, I met with toplevel representatives of the NAR. I can't tell you how many times I was accosted after my presentations by men and women, faithful servants of our democratic tradition. They pleaded with me. "We need a superweapon, they said. "We need to go beyond our pre-emptive strike policy and make a definitive impact before the terrorists become terrorists. We need to reach the schools, reach the kids, reach the citizenry at large. We need to get down to the molecular level. And if we can't do that, at least we can tweak the genome a bit. That, my friends, is my reason for being here. Moon Base is an

experiment whose time has come. Are there any questions before I proceed with the interactive media portion of my briefing?"

General Aruna "Banji" Matoya shot up a withered hand. He spoke through a voice synthesizer. "Dr Castillo, I share these concerns. Do you have any suggestions regarding Planet Jihad in the Mujahadeen System? Our intelligence indicates that Jihad will have WMD capability in fifty years. Can we afford to wait?"

"An excellent point," responded Castillo. "The answer is no.

"But, with all due respect to the general, have you considered more imminent threats?"

"Sir?"

"I will explain with another question. How many of you have children?"

Nearly one hundred hands went up.

"I myself do not. However, as a biological scientist, an economist, a war planner and a counterterrorism expert, I have studied the phenomenon at close hand. Children are our greatest natural, ahem, resource. Yet they present the greatest capacity for destruction that we know. I believe that security for our Republic begins with securing the ideological conformity of our children at the genetic level. Barring that, we must bring severe measures to bear."

Dead silence.

"How many times have you wished for more security in your homes? I'm not looking for a show of hands this time," he added as many of the same individuals threw up digits.

"He-he, it's a rhetorical question. We all wish for more security, but without considering the origin of that wish. It's simple. A wish for more security is a wish for freedom from worry about our future. Our children's future. As you know, the military research settlement at Moon Base has been allotted windfall funds to concentrate on Project Jason. I'm proud to be leading up this operation from the scientific end, but I want you all to realize, as representatives of the military, that Project Jason has larger objectives than keeping the interstellar peace. Could you throw the lights please?"

The wraparound thirty-foot holomedia screen dwarfed Castillo's otherwise imposing presence. He stepped out with an interactive

laser pointer.

"I'm going to show you some scenes you may recognize. This is an early passive titled *Friday the 13th*. You've probably seen this film at some point. It is a recognized classic. What you may not know is that when this 'motion picture' was first released, the majority of the public thought it was fiction. It went on to make a record amount of money at the box office, but unlike films such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or *The Blair Witch Project*, no attempt was made by the filmmakers to pass the film off as true. Because not even the filmmakers knew they were making what amounts to a documentary.

"The reality upon which this film was based, unbeknownst to the producers, the director and the writer, was far worse, far more terrible than anything they could possibly have imagined. Through a series of clandestine operations too tortuous to rehearse here, the original screenwriter, Victor Miller, was passed notes on certain key plot points. Those notes originated in a government think tank connected with the still active MK Ultra program.

"Yes, you're aware of MK Ultra. Certainly it seems barbaric to us now that the U.S. Government tested hallucinogenic drugs on children, that they employed psychics to control minds at a distance—all of that is part of the public record. But the people behind MK Ultra were not fascists or fools. Sometimes scientific progress isn't understood at the time it's being made, which is why we have science fiction, horror, fantasy—to lighten the learning curve of the paradigm shift. MK Ultra from its inception had worked on the possibility of mass mind control, from the early stages of development upward.

"Fear is the key. You might say that fear is the greatest weapon one can wield. And fear, of the boogeyman, of things that go bump, of cryptic terrorists and random subversives—fear is what kept our Republic strong in the early days. What we have here with Jason Voorhees is one of the greatest forces for fear the world has ever known. And it starts with the youth. As you can see from this simplistic but effective film, teenagers tend to run rampant without direct supervision. Even with direct supervision, they find ways to sneak away. To indulge their primitive biological needs. Even Sean Cunningham, who originated the *Friday* series, said it was about the

fear of untimely death—not a morality tale. But he was only half right. What that film, and many like it, succeeded in doing was to introduce the fear factor at the point of indulgence—to insert caution where imprudence might reign. What was true in the 20th Century is true in the 25th: children can only be truly disciplined through fear. And that fear, ladies and gentlemen, is what we intend to provide."

A strong bass voice pierced the sudden silence. "Ken Otta here. I have a question."

His accent was clearly that of a native of La Nouvelle Caribe, a complex of linked islands in the Asiatic Ocean. "We've been listening to this folderol with a great deal of patience, you know. But I think what the man says is wrong."

Even confined to a wheelchair, Otta struck an imposing figure. He turned around. Many were nodding in agreement.

"I say the man is wrong. He talks, but without the understanding. Now my granddaddy used to say—"

"May I ask..." interjected Castillo to a chorus of boos. "May I ask for your point, sir? We still have a lot of ground to cover."

"The man asks for a point." Laughter and scattered applause erupted from the audience.

"I think the point is clear. My granddaddy used to say that the only thing to do with a dead man that walks is to shoot 'im in the head."

"Sir, with all due respect, this situation is far more complex."

"There is no complexity to it! You're the one with the complexity, getting it all mixed together in your thick head. That's the problem with the white man, he doesn't know when to use his intelligence and when to let it rest.

"Shoot 'em in the brainpan, mon, and bring 'em down for good!"

"May I ask for the gentleman's qualifications?" said Castillo testily.

"The man asks for my qualifications. That's rich. Do you not know, sir, that I am the Moon Base Deputy for Public Disinformation? A paid servant of the public will?"

"That is as it may be, but I don't see the relevance of some hare-brained folklore to this highly complex medical situation!"

"It's not hare-brained, and you only call it folklore because you won't see the truth of it. Today's magic is tomorrow's science, you

know. Many generations ago, when our ancestors lived on Earth Prime, we recognized there were some creatures that don't die when they're dead. We called 'em zombies. Now whether there's a virus going around waking up the brothers, or whether it's some kind of pollution from power plants, we don't know. I don't think we'll ever know. There's always some kind of confusion on that thing. But we do know one thing: those zombies are evil. They may look like your brother and sister, but they will eat your flesh and suck down your blood as sure as I'm talking here!"

"So," said Castillo in a tone of infinite disdain. "You're saying that because Jason Voorhees resembles one of these zombies. I say resembles because my analysis indicates otherwise. That we should just jettison the program—which is, by the way, paying our salaries—and treat him like a public health concern? A shot to the head, that'll do it? Eh?"

(Although when he reflected on it, a shot to the head usually worked wonders with the walking dead.)

"No mon, you're taking it way, way out of context. I just think we need to analyze exactly what we're doing here. Rather than finding some way to properly dispose of the beast, we've kept him, preserved him, grown him strong and well with our technology.

"Once he gets loose, we're all doomed men! Why are we setting ourselves up like sheep for the slaughter?"

"Sir, you may be aware that very stringent protocols have been set up to negate the possibility you are describing."

"I'm just saying we need to think outside the box for a change. You know, if the man is evil, he's going to stay evil. If he's into hurting kids, he will hurt some of this fresh crop."

"We're sittin' on a powderkeg here. I just don't want to be around when it explodes."

"Your advice is taken under advisement," said Castillo.

He mopped his brow with an elegant linen handkerchief. "May we please continue?"

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Astronomers call some planets dead worlds. These are planets that, though circling a sun, orbit a star that has long since ceased to glow, a fast spinning neutron star called a pulsar.

Controversy swirls over whether to even call these dead worlds planets; many are small enough to be termed asteroids.

It's a matter of perspective, too.

Nothing exists without context. Without reference to the web. Astronomers also believe that these planets, or asteroids, form part of the fringe area of a miniature solar system. An exact copy, in other words—or worlds—of that surrounding Earth Prime.

Ken Otta specialized in dead worlds.

A veteran of Psyops and the First War on Evil, Ken Otta cultivated his public persona to gleaming perfection. He realized full well that he risked personifying the well-polished stereotype of a thousand bad Prevac passives.

But he was willing to take that chance. It wouldn't be the first time, nor the last, that a black man was held accountable for the sins of the white fathers.

Common sense, according to scientific dogma, holds that the dead cannot come back to life. To believe that zombies may harm us is a piece of rank superstition worthy only of the tabloid press and the greedheads who avidly support it. Frequently, common sense is wrong. Dead wrong, even. And Otta knew it. Just as he knew that the so-called "fringe material" dubbed dead worlds harbored the most sinister kind of life.

Life that looks like its opposite. Until provoked.

Jason Voorhees was one such dead world.

Still, "there is no point in trying to teach a pig to sing", as Otta's granddaddy used to say. "It just wears you out, and it seriously pisses off the pig. Not that Otta thought of the sneering scientists like Dr Castillo as pigs; far from it. They were predator animals.

Otta was determined not to look like prey.

According to the ancient Chinese military treatise, *The Art of War*, a successful warrior will con his enemies into thinking they are dealing with a weak and underprepared adversary.

Otta essayed the role of fool to perfection. He owned the original of the one on the Tarot pack. He had many enemies, inside and outside NeoWashington.

And, much like the zombies of his native folklore, these enemies were out for blood.

Otta used a wheelchair to get around. He had served his time in the interstellar corps, taken rounds in the spine, but refused nanotech reconstruction. As a result, myth coalesced around the man like a fog. Followed his every movement. Infused itself into his words; his body language; his license.

Nobody knew what to think of him. A fool, a hero, a visionary, a dreamer, a crank? All of the above?

One thing was known: never to underestimate him. His enemies frequently came to grief. A legend around the Pentagram ran that Otta's great-great-great-grandfather had been some kind of voudon priest.

Otta himself did nothing to dispel this rumor. It worked well for him. Particularly when it came to his chosen field. Disinformation.

Ironically enough, Otta arrived at this capacity not by a love of artifice, but rather through an acute sensitivity to the truth. Or rather, to a multiplicity of truths.

From a young child, he heard and understood the conversations of adults on multiple levels. As he grew, embraced by a multi-generational community, Otta retained his first, innocent sense of what words could do; the tasks they could perform, the codes they might execute, what they might mean, unfettered from any law, discipline or code that regulated their use. Reading the philosophy of John Searle, he realized that words could make things happen.

But then again, he'd known that all along.

It was called voodoo. The gift. La facultad.

Otta felt as though his brain were tuned in to a certain frequency, catching interstellar radio signals others brushed aside like a strand of cobweb. Noise pollution, the hiss of static impeding a forward march.

Once Otta understood the sounds arrayed before his mind's eye like fractal hieroglyphs. Once he had begun to truly appreciate the

dimension, weight and majesty of those sounds, he couldn't go back. He never wanted to. The gift was far too precious.

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April Carlson looked worried. "I don't know about this. I'm beginning to have second thoughts."

Wendy rolled her eyes. "No. You're not allowed."

Little bitch. When was she going to shape up, shut up, and learn a little attitude readjustment?

"Seriously Wendy, maybe we should just stick with the program."

"The program? What program? Oh, you mean the Moon Camp Americana itinerary? That Mind Camp shit?"

Fractal parasites effortlessly glaze the text.

"Well, yeah. Only I think it's called *Mein Kampf*."

"After the famous Negro, I mean NeoAfrican-American, baseball star?"

"No, after the man who took so much speed he thought he was God, and convinced a generation of righteous Germans to abandon all moral instincts and go shoulder to shoulder against the Jews."

"Fuck that. I mean, who's going to be enforcing that shit anyway? It's all for show."

"I wouldn't worry myself too much about it."

"So what are we going to do about the German?"

"Fuck the German. I don't care. Come on."

"Oh," said April. "You mean like, fuck the Roman Empire!"

"Basically what it wound up in the end," muttered Wendy. "Goth barbarians."

Wendy pulled April down the hatch. Above them, the floors effortlessly closed. They walked beneath the wall of sphinxes. And it was dark indeed.

"Shouldn't we at least have brought some light?" April stage whispered.

"Hush, little bitch," Wendy said affectionately. The whelp would pull back, and she'd bring her forward. Just to the point of not strangling her. Too hard, anyway.

"So you've got that taken care of."

"I do indeed," Wendy said. She dug in her jacket pocket, pulled out two glowsticks.

"You brought glowsticks?"

"Well, they're not just any glowsticks, love. Just crack one of these puppies. You'll see."

April took one of the tubes. She bent it over her knee experimentally. Immediately, a beam of light began to grow around them, expanding like a ray full of bubbles.

"See, we only need one. I'm going to keep the other in reserve. Just in case. They've got a great shelf life, but you know this NAR government-standard shit."

"Where did you get those things?"

"A girl must preserve her sense of mystery," Wendy said softly.

"Look, some steps leading down."

"Where? What? I don't see anything."

"Right in front of you, silly."

(Grave birds, spread your wings.)

April looked. "Oh, I see." The shadows were uncomfortably goddamn close.

"Well what are you waiting for?"

April shrugged, put out a tentative foot into the darkness. Nothing snapped back at her. A good sign, if negative. She took the next step.

Wendy followed, bathing them in a swathe of glowlight.

"Why do I always have to lead the way?"

Wendy laughed. "Cause you're my canary, that's why."

"What the fuck do you mean by that?"

"Hush, doll. Let me explain. Years ago, back in Prevac times, they used to mine coal. That was before matter compilers, of course. Anyway, coal miners always kept a bird in a cage. If the bird croaked, they knew that their air was running out."

"So I'm the bird?" asked April warily.

"This canary? I thought that was just a color!"

"Well, you're sure not the fucking sphinx."

April sighed. "Okay, okay. Hey, look!"

Wendy swung the beam up. Around them, fractal ladders of microchip crawled the walls. Giant shadowed recesses opened up on vast galleries based on subatomic structures. MC Escher's ghost dogs writhed through the flickering black and white rectangles of an Henri Rousseau dreamscape.

The galleries themselves bled galleries. Light from infinite stairwells flashed and smacked against wall surfaces, like Dadaist mathematicians full of the Mandelbrot liquid.

They stepped up to a large basin. The floor began to slope downward.

"Wait, stop," said Wendy. "Look at that."

The girls stared in awe. At the bottom of the basin lay three symmetrical tubes. Inside the tubes were three men, dressed in black. Tiny white collars choking their necks. Much like April's imaginary collar. Looking like granite Indians.

"Are those what I think they are?" April asked.

"Dudette, I think so."

"So you're saying..."

"I'm saying we found the Teknopriests," said Wendy

A low-pitched hum vibrated around the basin.

"What the hell is that?" April asked.

"I don't know. But whatever it is, I don't like it."

They both agreed, simultaneously. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

They giggled and ran like hell.

# NINE

Extract from *A Whimsical Itinerary for Starfleet Command*  
(Source[s] unknown)

*Starfleet Command uses a whimsical itinerary, its specifics wasted on ordinary tabulation. Among many other things, the data it calculates:*

*Glitterati from other dimensions, some genuinely glamorous Fractal hierophants.*

*Morality tales written in a dreary alien tongue.*

*Lesser conjurations of the Omniscient Spectator.*

*Abject spins of Julia Kristeva's head, made on a bet.*

*Massive architectural repositories of the Maya junkies.*

*Toxic pharmacologists looking for a way in.*

*Rapid mutations between forms.*

*Spins of a single larval bullet, frozen in the Mandelbrot juice.*

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April didn't get it. "Um, what's the big deal about this Jason guy anyway?" She tugged at and extracted a stray eyelash, giggling to herself. The lash sat on a silver metallic fingernail. She blew it away. It landed on the shiny black matte surface of her N-shirt, which bore the legend: "I'm No Longer With Stupid".

Not getting an answer immediately, April pointed to the lash, which quivered against the nanopore fabric. "Do you think that counts as a wish?"

Wendy fixed April with her patented "don't be a stupid bitch" look. She shook her head, cascading immense dark ringlets down her back. She winched the bottom of her black mesh micropore N-shirt around a knuckle. Her nipples stood out in sharp relief.

"Wish for a brain transplant," Wendy answered by way of an insult. "It's the coming thing. Get it? Com-ing? Cumming?"

"Aw come on, you know something and you're just holding out."

"Not a problem you've ever had," Wendy spat back, venomous by pure reflex.

She seemed surprised herself by the bitchiness of her mood.

"Look, I'm sorry, rag time—Mother Nature's little helper' and all. Jason's no big deal. He's just some Ronnie Raygun-era Prevac legend our parents took up so they could scare the shit out of us."

"Well they're doing a pretty good job."

"On you, maybe." Wendy wound up a ring of hair on her index finger and let it unwrap like a spring. "Anyway, even if he is real, what's so scary about a retarded goalie?"

"I don't know, how does it feel Wendy?"

"Shut the fuck up. Just because you never get one past me. Jason Voorhees? He's a legend. And not even a good legend. Back in Prevac they had some stories, man. Remember Frankenstein and the Wolf Man? And Freddy Krueger? *Scream 1313: The Cycle Continues?* *Sexorcist 666: A Hardon for Lucifer?* I practically peed my pants I was so scared with that one. But Jason—shit, Jason Voorhees is some sort of mutant psycho retard who misses his Mommy really, really bad. So bad that every time he's revived, which is fairly often, he goes after all the kids who remind him of the camp counselors Mommy killed, like avenging her cruel dead-by-decap ass."

"How does his mom fit in?" April asked, tugging on her spiked black leather choker.

"Pamela Voorhees was the cook at Camp Crystal Lake, where the story began. Apparently the camp counselors were too busy making out, smoking drugs and having a good time to notice that poor, wee Jason was being sucked into the lake.

"You know, maybe if she'd taught him how to swim."

"But you said he was a 'tard."

"Yeah, that's true," said Wendy. "But even your average 'tard would have to know that, um, struggling and thrashing around does not better your chances of flotation. I mean, if he even knew how to dog paddle or fucking float on his back, who knows?"

"With a little therapy and some psych drugs he might have grown up, married some equally hideous creature and had a whole brood of critters with dolphin flippers for arms and five eyes apiece. But no,

he has to get himself drowned. And the bitch of it is, he didn't even really drown. He sort of drowned. Long enough for mommy to go around putting axes in people's heads."

"Kosher meats," said April. She scrunched up her nose as though processing a difficult concept in higher math. "Mom was so majorly necro! But that means Jason really took his time with the whole revenge thing.

"Talk about a slow burn. What was he doing, living on nuts and berries and squirrel meat?"

"Nobody really knows how he spent his, uh, developmental years." Wendy smiled. With her typically fierce expression and black lipstick, it came off as an evil smile.

"Maybe he spent all that time in some sort of cocoon, or under a very large rock. It's not like we're talking the *Apocrypha* here."

April's eyes widened. "He was watching all the camp counselors fuck like jackrabbits, and he was like, jerking off the whole time. Then one day he found out he couldn't come, so he took his bloody revenge. Impotence kills!"

She laughed at her own joke, then grew thoughtful. "So, didn't they kill him? Like, many times?"

For once, Wendy looked stumped. "Uh huh."

"And he keeps coming back. Why?"

Wendy scowled. "Well, that's a dumb question. 'Cause he's, I don't know, the boogeyman?"

Even April found this answer less than totally satisfying. "For real, I mean..."

"Well, in the legend," Wendy continued, assuming the supercilious tone of a teacher saddled with a particularly dull student, "Jason must come back until he is killed by a direct family member. Kin. Voorhees blood. Stabbed through the fucking heart until dead.

"You see, when Pamela was pregnant with young Jason, her husband Elias was up to some backwoods witchery—you know, trailer-trash black magic. Hillbilly voodoo.

"But the Voorhees clan wasn't always low-rent. See, Elias's great-great-great-grandfather was a powerful warlock who lived in Salem town. He was feared and hated by the local townsfolk, who tried to

kill him again and again. They said he had one of the 666 known copies of the *Necronomicon Ex Mortis*—The Book of Dead Names—by which he could conjure demons from another dimension. They were sick of their nubile young daughters disappearing into the Voorhees mansion and never being seen again.

"In the year 1667, on the night of Samhein—the most powerful holiday in the witch's calendar—a group of townsfolk gathered around the Voorhees mansion with torches and pitchforks. This time they had him—or so they thought. Weird flashing lights began to appear in the sky. They saw Jebediah Voorhees standing in the bell-tower, and then he vanished. They burned his house anyway, but his body was never discovered."

"But the *Necro...* watsis survived?"

"Yes, April. The Book of Deadly Nicknames lay forgotten among the Voorhees family papers until one day when Elias came across it while looking for kindling material. They say he accidentally called up a demon that possessed his unborn son. And that is why Jason cannot be killed."

"That sounds like weapons-grade bullshit to me."

"Well, yeah," said Wendy. "That's just one version. I mean, there are stories and stories about this guy. One thing they never mention, though, is his equipment. He must have had an enormous, um, pig-sticker! Think about it."

Wendy smiled reflectively. "Wonder how long the tek guys are going to withstand our onslaught before they start to wibble-wobble in the sausage department? Does it not suck that guys achieve their sexual peak at eighteen while we're just getting our feet wet?"

"Just our feet?" asked April, reaching around Wendy's stomach and locking her fingers right below the titline. "Oh, Wendy, I'm Jason Voorhees and I'm coming for you!"

Wendy detached April's fingers and clamped them down on her crotch. "Okay, do that some more and I'll be coming for you!" She reached over and grabbed a pillow from her bunk.

"Nobody could explain his lust for blood," Wendy said in the patrician tones of a trailer for a Neoltalian holo-horror. "But just

around midnight, while the kiddies were supposed to be dreaming about Jesus, Jason came a-callin'."

April doubled up with silent laughter. "You're making my lungs hurt!" she squealed. "Welcome to hillbilly hell!"

Wendy raised herself to her grand height of five feet, five inches and stood with her head slightly cocked, clutching the pillow. "Better say your prayers now before Jason gets you!"

She deliberately raised the pillow above her head and brought it squarely down on April's forearm. Completely in the spirit of the thing, April clasped her arm in mock horror. "Arrgh! I'm hideously mutilated! And I know I shouldn't have been smoking, getting high and um, masturbating with common household appliances. I'll be good and never, ever do it again! Please don't kill me Jason! Hey Jason, isn't that your mother standing over there shaking her head?"

Wendy stared at the empty bunks and then back at April. She took up the pillow again. April straggled crablike across the room with Wendy in close pursuit. Wendy rammed the pillow against the base of April's spine. It was then that she heard the telltale clack of stiletto heels coming down the hallway.

"Shit on a stick—it's The German!"

"Dude! Since when has getting high prevented you from having fun with authority!"

An exaggerated precision informed the voice that followed hard on the spiked heels.

"You young ladies should have been asleep two hours ago!" The "s" sounds came out with a sibilant hiss. "And where are the others?"

"Others?" asked Wendy, making her face a mask of density. "What others?"

"Oh, if only the Fuhr—I mean your parents could see you now. Don't you know that without proper REM sleep you will be subject to severe hallucinations—big, black fuzzy vooorms?"

"Awesome!" Wendy said. "How do we shake this REM thing?"

Helga Van Schmerz—all six feet, two inches of the Teutonic überbitch—loomed in the doorway. She was not smiling. One crystal blue eye looked like it was fighting for dominance with the other, and losing.

A slight tic tugged at her thin, frozen smile.

"Well? I want an instant accounting of everyone's whereabouts!" Every sentence from her lips sounded as though it demanded at least one exclamation point and a fistful of umlauts. "I will count off according to our standard protocol. Eins... Zwei..."

"This would be so much better on drugs," whispered Wendy.

April still had a cramp in her side from laughing so hard.

"Yeah," she whispered back. "Authority is severely cool on meta-absinthe. Discipline and punish, all the way baby!"

Amanda, Clarissa and Katie suddenly appeared in the other entrance hatchway. The girls had the slick, wet seal look of wrestlers in lubricant.

Van Schmerz fixed them with a gaze that might have been even more withering, were her eyes coordinated.

Sadly, they were not.

"Moon Camp Americana, contrary to popular belief, is not a reform school for wayward ladies! We expect you to honor your commitments to the regimen of good health and scientific exercise so that you may bear many... obstacles for the Fatherland."

Clarissa lobbed a wad of lube at April.

April ducked, landing the sex jelly on Helga's ash-blonde bun. Helga reached immediately to her head and tried to shake off the stuff, splattering the wall opposite the bunks in doing so. "What is the meaning of this outrage?" she bellowed.

April, emboldened by Wendy's friendship, waved her hand excitedly like the prize pupil she was not.

"I know, I know," she shrieked. "On your back or on your belly, things go better with..." and Wendy mouthed the closer, "Interzone KY!"

They hugged one another, falling to the floor in hysterical giggles.

Van Schmerz stood, hands perched imperiously on hips. "This is not acceptable. You will clean up this mess immediately. And then go to bed."

She took Wendy's chin in her hand and shouted directly at her head. "Do I make myself crystal clear?"

"Yeah, 'cause you've got my chin in your hand, and you're shouting at me! Hello! Are you aware of my parents, the Fontaines? If you lay one more hand on me I swear to Bob you won't be able to get a job mopping piss off the floor in a woman's penitentiary. But maybe you'd like that, eh Helga? So many orifices, so little time..."

Helga did not relinquish her grip. Instead, she moved her hand down until an index finger pressed close against Wendy's jugular vein.

"Please do not overestimate your position, young lady. I have been authorized to use every means in my power to convert you all into model citizens. And I do intend to use every means in my power. Do we understand one another?"

Wendy, whom nothing scared, looked scared.

"Yes, we understand."

The recent arrivals quickly scurried to the shower facilities. "We're just going to clean up and then we'll go to bed," said Amanda. "Okay?"

Helga nodded. "Okay. And then I want the lights kaput! Machen sie schnell, jungfrauen!"

\*\*\*

In the last days of the European front in World War II, the Nazis, in collaboration with the esoteric Volkisch societies, developed an amazing array of technology. Among the more splendid of their accomplishments rose undead warriors, the soidisant Toddenkorps. Blind manglers of the living. Nightmares even for the already dead.

Using the results of concentration camp experiments, the Nazi scientists were able to see the limit where soul peeled off from flesh. They froze and unfroze helpless human guinea pigs, establishing that men and women can be put on ice and later thawed out, good as new. In this way they developed the first cryogenic freezers.

Helga Van Schmerz was among the first set of babies to come in to the cold. She had been killed and reborn several times in her thirty-five years. The first time she died, at nineteen years old, found her a

code programmer, psychometrician and all-around uberhottie for the Third Reich.

Van Schmerz was a terror. Long before her activities were documented in a series of films shot secretly on the set of the popular TV series *Hogan's Heroes*, she was already a media star.

Young Nazi women idolized her. Young Nazi males wanted to be dominated by her. The padded rooms in which she tortured victims rivaled, in sheer volume of terror, even the Al Ghraib debacle of the early 21st Century.

Favoring adolescent girls for their rich entertainment potential, Van Schmerz subjected nerve endings to the most sophisticated pain yet known to civilization.

No orifice was left unravaged. No innocence unchecked.

Through such methodology, she was given the nickname "Countess Bathory", after the 16th Century Hungarian royalty whose practices she emulated.

In 1947, as the Allied forces stormed the enclave where she was hiding along with the Reich Marshals and their loyal canine friends, Helga was taken down into the basement, administered a sedative, and, once again, placed on ice, only to wake up in the late 20th Century, enrolled as a graduate student at the prestigious Sarah Lawrence College. Teaching, of all things, French literature.

Her seminars were infamous. In order to fully demonstrate what she called psychophysical theory, particularly as applied to postmodernist interpretation, girls were whipped, branded and pierced. Voluntarily, of course.

While teaching "Pornography and Feminism," a course that centered on *l'Histoire d'O* and *l'Image*, Van Schmerz took her class on virtual field trips to a thoroughly reconstructed "Gothic chamber" of her own devising.

This fiendish soundstage owed a lot less to Catherine Robbe-Grillet, the author of *l'Image*, and a lot more to contemporary websites like Gotherotica, besides Van Schmerz's memories of the Volkisch groups of her youth.

To the accompaniment of black metal bands like Darkthrone, Cradle of Filth and Limbonic Art, the girls of Sarah Lawrence College

were strapped against the wall of a dungeon, forced to recite voluntary statements of contrition for imaginary sins.

As Van Schmerz poured black candle wax over their breasts.

Many took the course a second and third time. Until a concerned dean stepped in, it was one of the most popular courses at the College. At that point, "Pornography and NeoFeminism" became a staple of the Experimental College, and moved out of the course curriculum. Rumors of sinister hazing and satanic initiation ceremonies conducted in underground ritual chambers were extremely well founded.

Until Van Schmerz had to die again.

This actually happened quite by accident. She was out on the quad, hand in hand with one of her more promising students, when a freak electrical storm delivered a dagger of wattage straight through her spinal column. She expired instantly.

Her body was hijacked en route to the hospital. Immediately flash-frozen.

That was all she remembered, until she was resuscitated in the 25th Century as a guidance counselor for Moon Camp Americana.

Van Schmerz took to her new job, her new life, like a duck to water.

\*\*\*

"Stand by," said the camera tech.

Lisa looked around the set, a little irritated that Roger wasn't there. She had been standing by indefinitely, it seemed. But resolutely. Smartly, even. Yes, sir. If there was one thing Lisa Foxx didn't lack, it was resolution.

By this point, Lisa stood beside herself many times, watching her body move as a phantom, animated by some recondite energy source she would never fully understand. Like that one song by Motorhead. Or Roger Bordeaux.

He was telepresencing, as the man usually did during the first few weeks of a new reality show. Your people invented heroin, but you were too uptight to realize its glories. Phoning in his identity from an

insulated cave, the bastard; checking for accuracy, fine-tuning the detail. Troubleshooting. Preparing live rounds for everything that didn't conform to his vision.

"Everything looks good," he whispered in Lisa's headset.

"Roger! Holy fuck gods!"

\*\*\*

In what many scholars believe to be the final story Poe ever wrote, a man in a lighthouse begins to suspect something horribly grim. He has built his lighthouse on sand. And the sand monsters were closing in. On little crustacean feet.

\*\*\*

"Where are you?" Of course she knew exactly where Roger was. As if his GPS coordinates made any sense with an ego of that magnitude and complexity. But she needed to make her point nonetheless.

"I'm in your head, Lisa."

"Yeah, besides that."

"What more do you need to know, love?"

His charm, his bullshit, rather, was usually enough to flood Lisa's head with visions of sugarcane fields. Against her will, she had begun to succumb. But she couldn't let him know that the flesh was weak. Even though the current was still running strong. Not that weak, not without a fight.

"Besides a clue as to when and how you're going to leave my head and join me on the set? I don't know, buddy."

(He really hated being called "buddy". She was being cruel.)

"Just hold tight and do the intro. You'll be fine."

"I suppose," said Lisa.

But Lisa was game. Unfortunately, she thought to herself, she was also a little game-y. As usual, the hyperspace bump had fucked with her normal, impeccable hygiene. It irritated her that they couldn't fix that little programming glitch. They didn't get game, apparently. Game-y.

"Could you cue the actresses, please?" Lisa asked the program manager, a hirsute mandroid they called Fat Albert.

"Humor me."

"Sure, boss," said Albert, his lazy loops of dialogue seemingly directed at nobody in particular. He pointed a laser beam at the actresses' marks.

Laser light rippled off the geodesic angles of the biodome and broke up in tiny mirror fragments.

"This is Lisa Foxx reporting live from Moon Camp."

She stood in front of a pier that led out onto a lake. The computer-generated sun soared high in the sky. The lake was real, rippling. Ready for some hot reality action. Some extreme hot reality action. For real.

From a shuttle orbiting in geosynchronous spacetime with Moon Base Americana, Roger Bordeaux checked the feed. The picture needed a little tweaking. And so did Roger Bordeaux.

"Could we adjust those waves?" he asked. "We're getting a little fractal breakup." He fumbled in an overhead compartment for some juice.

No juice. No gin, for that matter. Dammit! His contract was explicit: the rider always mandated, at minimum, the quality dwarf bud. But he would have to make do with what he had. Not much. But still...

Roger put his hand blindly back in; clasped a vial of tangerine-colored rocks.

Shrugging, Bordeaux placed a single rock in front of him. Withdrew a razor from his coat pocket.

"No problem," said Albert. Bordeaux nodded. He had no idea what the fuck Albert was on about, but Albert was always agreeable. And that was the main thing.

"Sorry Lisa, you know I'm a terrible perfectionist." Roger cut the rock into three long lines and delicately plucked the long platinum tooter from the overhead compartment. He hoovered the shit.

"You're a terrible pain in the ass," Lisa shot back.

She adjusted her microphone. Gritted her teeth at the feedback swarm that burst in her headset. Lisa was picking up ghosts again.

"This is Lisa Foxx reporting live from Moon Camp

"I'm standing here, okay I'm standing here and talking and my lips are moving and something called English is coming out of them. And I hope I'm not getting any glare off my nose. Okay, we can cut this ramble out in post. It's a beautiful day, the sun is high in the sky, we're waiting for the Moon Campers. And waiting. Albert?"

"Sorry. Just a moment miss."

Samantha Regina and Yvonne DeSanto emerged from their respective cabins. Walked out on the pier.

Prevac-style black bikini bottoms clung to posteriors nature had little part in constructing. Nature, however, would take that credit.

"Look at that water!" Samantha said. "It's so right for a little skinny-dipping."

"Whoo hoo!" shrieked Yvonne. "I am so ready for a little nude bathing."

The girls removed their bikini bottoms.

"As you can see behind me, these Moon Campers are out for a bit of fun."

A split screen superimposed itself on both sides of Lisa's face.

On the left, biometric data for Samantha Regina spilled out: five feet nine inches, one hundred and twenty pounds, dark brown hair, seventeen years old (twenty-three). On the right, Yvonne DeSanto: Roughly equivalent, except that Yvonne was blonde and sixteen (twenty-one in actual years).

"A bit of naughty fun. A bit of fun not sanctioned by the NAR, and certainly not tolerated by the parents who worked and sacrificed years of their lives to give these young ladies a good education. If you know what I mean." Sharp wink. "But when the cat's away, as they used to say, the girls will play. Later on we're going to meet Samantha and Yvonne. But right now, let's see what they're going to do with their summer."

Three teen boys walked onto the set: Bob Tennyson, Walter Santiago and Orlando Flores. All guild members.

"And what do we have here? Looks like boys!" Lisa grimaced at the cheesy dialog she was spouting. But at least it was her own cheese.

Not the Rimbaldian asscheese, but still better than the Velveeta. "I wonder what will happen next?" she asked in tones of deepest velvet.

The cameras alighted on the boy's broad shoulders, swam off the pier's high dive with them one by one. As they joined the nude girls in the water. Live nude girls. Splashing. About to be enjoyed by an interplanetary audience of perverts and mutants.

"Remember," said Lisa, "we're coming to you live. As anybody familiar with Roger Bordeaux Productions knows, anything—and I mean anything—can happen. I gotta admit I'm a little curious myself."

She winced. The only thing she was curious about is how long the assignment would last. How long, that is, before she broke down and hurt someone.

"And cut," said Roger. "Beautiful. Let's take a little break and we can recreate some of the lake footage later. Maybe do a little montage." He spoke like a gay interior designer. He needed a little montage in his own brain, of his testicular past.

"Sounds good to me," said Lisa. "I think I'm getting an artificial sunburn." And that wasn't all of it.

Lisa unhooked her minimic then walked off the set. Albert signaled the girls, who ignored him.

"Ladies, we're going to take a short break."

Samantha was making out with Bob. Walter and Orlando, meanwhile, had their arms around Yvonne. Albert shrugged. "Well, no harm, no foul." Albert was agreeable.

Lisa walked back to her trailer. She really needed a bath. And a haircut. And manicure. And some fresh nail polish. And some crank. And some beer. Some more crank. Okay, but only one more beer.

Well gee, if you insist! Bottoms up, dude!

\*\*\*

"Oh, Senator!"

"Yes, Hon?"

"Guess what's on?"

"Gee, I wonder. Could it be Moon Camp?"

Sabrina smiled. "Yes darling, it's Moon Camp. What a wonderful thing it's turned out to be. And just look at the contestants they have!" Senator Carlson snuggled himself into the couch. He sported a dark gray leisure suit. His wife, yummy as ever, sported a wet yellow number. It looked freshly spattered on. He threw on a vircher headset. Put his arm around His Girl. Even threw her a little love bite.

April's absence brought them closer. Even if little Bobby was still at large, breeding nanobot armies beneath largely static toes. They sat awhile in silence. Little Bobby floated in a discretionary bubble. But it was their discretionary bubble.

The Carlson's.

A family heritage, really. An icon as priceless in its own way as the original space ark used in the movie *Risky Business V: Satan Lives!*

Starring the syntheppian, Thomas M Cruise.

"I can't believe it," Sabrina said. "Finally, we're going to get some peace and quiet around here.

"And maybe, just maybe, those polls will start to shift."

"I certainly hope so," said the Senator. "You've done all you can do from a, ahem, rerouting and coding perspective.

"But with these damned polls, they want to make sure that the people' think they have a say."

"I agree," Sabrina said. "It is, well, disconcerting, to say the least. But I guess that's the price we have to pay for democracy."

"Or something that looks like democracy," furnished the Senator. "Even if it smells like teen spirit."

"Exactly."

"And speaking of damn polls, what do you call yourself then?"

"You got me," Senator Carlson said. Laughed. An interview was on.

Lisa Foxx, sitting in a cabin by a lake, talking to two girls: Samantha and Yvonne. Samantha looked bored out of her skull. She was twisting her hair into baroque braids. Elaborate morphologies of the Anzalduan Galaxy. Yvonne's eyes kept wandering off. From time to time, Samantha rapped her knuckles against her friend's head.

Yvonne yowled: "You stupid bitch!"

"This is Lisa Foxx, reporting live from Moon Camp. I'm here with our two representatives, Samantha and Yvonne. Which of you girls wants to start first?"

Dead silence. Blank stares. All but outright drool. (And the latter seemed imminent.)

"Yvonne, let's talk with you first. How did you first hear about Moon Camp?"

"Well," said Yvonne, her lips moving slightly out of synch with the voice feed. "I don't know really. My parents started to talk it up. They gab and yack something terrible. Makes me feel like a poor, misunderstood Yankee belle.

"I just wanted to go somewhere different for summer break. I don't know"

"Different?"

"You know, something besides the old mall."

"Well of course. Ha ha. Are you enjoying yourself? Having fun?"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, there're lots of things to do here. Fishing, horseback riding; they've got a water tunnel, slides, it's actually pretty cool." (Or so she'd been told.)

Yvonne looked bored to tears. She squinted her way through a case of the red eye.

"Okay, great. And Samantha?"

Samantha jumped. Nearly swallowed a clump of her hair. "Huh?"

"Samantha, darling, do you want to contribute anything?"

Samantha straddled a chair and rested her chin on the back.

"Oh. Um, no, not particularly."

"Anything you want to tell the folks back home?"

"Oh yeah. Hi Mom and Dad! I'm doing fine. It's great here. Really terrific. There's games, and horseback riding, and they even have a water tunnel!"

(At least, as far as Samantha had heard.)

"Well, there you have it, folks. This is Lisa Foxx reporting live from Moon Camp. Where the instruction is twenty-four/seven and the fun never stops. Back to Roger Bordeaux in the studio. Roger?"

Roger was sleeping.

"Roger?"

He started up. Grabbed his headset. Breathed heavily into the mic.

"Am I on?"

"Yes Roger, we're live from Moon Camp.

"Remember, your show?"

"Ah yes.

"This is Roger Bordeaux. You may recall me from such reality holovid series as *Live from the Death Planet*, *Extreme Survival in Outer Space*, *Teens in Trouble*, *Teens in Trouble II* and *Why is Johnny Twitching So? (Could it be the Heinous Mandelbrot?)*"

He paused a beat for the inevitable "ah" of recognition.

Home on Earth II, viewers clustered around their video hearths breathed "ahs" of recognition.

"And, well, I've never been so excited with a show before. You know Lisa, these girls may look like they're bored senseless, but maybe that's just because they need a little firming up. Attitude-wise, I mean. Don't you think?"

"Yes Roger, I do. These girls definitely need some attitude adjustment. But I understand that'll be coming down the pike any day now." (Coming down the pike? What kind of happy horseshit was that? Her own brand, apparently.)

"So Lisa, from what I understand, the girls are being allowed their own way. For observation purposes."

"Yes, that's exactly it, Roger. They're being monitored with nanocams, while all their data is fed into this giant database where, at this point, I believe a rep from the Teknopriest enclave, or a liaison, Dr Armando Castillo, will determine the procedure of discipline."

"Armando Castillo. Now what do we know about Dr Castillo, exactly?"

"Well, Roger, his past is certainly mysterious. But I understand he comes highly qualified. All his stats are in order. And the Teknopriests seem to trust him, which goes a long way, as you know."

"Indeed I do." He had no idea what the fuck she had just said. "Well Lisa, thank you for the update, and we'll be checking back with you very soon.

"And now this brief commercial montage. Err, message."

"Okay, we're off the air," Lisa said. To herself, "And not a moment too soon."

\*\*\*

There was something enchanted about the scene: a quiet, unmistakable magic seemed to glimmer just beyond the simulated horizon. The mano that was about to play out partook both of the cosmic and the realistic.

True, the tableau, with its eerie resemblance to the old Camp Crystal Lake horror passives, had been assembled, constructed beneath the Moon's biodome at taxpayer expense.

The nearly cloudless deep blue sky, the expanse of lake with little whitecaps lapping on the further shore—all this had been expertly faked. A climate generator, some virching apparatus, layers of Utility Fog and a carefully built microenvironment created a convincing, wraparound illusion. The camp was basically a well-lit, three-dimensional set with moving parts that operated in real time. Always concealing what lay within.

\*\*\*

Moon Campers gaze at the stars. Soar. Break up into the stars. And float back in little confetti drifts. Lying flat on good aching backs. Aching flat on good backs. Back to back. Front to back. Neck in front.

Hey honey. Hi there.

Fresh from swimming. Fresh from rock-climbing.

Dead tired. And dead alive.

Because something is coming in the night. A blob without a conscience. A thing without a trace of compunction. With veins of black sludge. And a metal heart. Stamped with the bent convictions of a lifetime. An angry thing. With gnashing evil, angry teeth.

Silhouette glow brands dark poles against a tangerine background. Tent fabric rustles in the dark. Subliminal flash of oxen blood. A hand reaches up. Comes down. A body rises from below. Comes down.

Subliminal flesh inserts (flicker of optical censoring in the Japanese version). Metal spikes clack past one another like lizards in a Dario Argento flick. Two arms fall on the body: mannequin parts from a roadhouse revival of *Dawn of the Dead*.

Strings are unleashed. Guns drawn.

\*\*\*

"Oh honey, fuck me! You goony teenager you!"

"Darling, I never thought you'd ask.

"Honey?"

"Yes, darling?"

"I've got to pee. Do you mind?"

Scramble of panties, cutoff jeans, white threads peeping winks of fresh flesh.

"Not at all."

The girl placed a light hand over him. Just enough for a lingering memory. There's more where that's coming from. And crept off into the night.

(Crunch of phosphene-bearing rocks.)

To squat, and smoke some pot. The boy lay in the dark, thinking of home. Thinking of the flesh letters he had to write. Of the good times he was having. Of the good times he was about to have when his little sex puppet had to go.

But the boy had come this far, and he would wait. He'd been through too much this night to let it go because of a pee break. Or a pot break.

Damn, why was she being so mean with that shit? It was a tricky thing, natch, getting through the fortified line that separated the camps according to sex. Direct fusion mines were the least of his worries.

He only hoped he hadn't misunderstood her. The thought clotted his lymph nodes worse than the juice. The girl. (How nice that word tasted on his lips, fresh from kissing her.)

When she smiled at him over the campfire. When she licked her lips, flourescence of adolescent afterburn. Charnelhouse glow of

hormones.

Something came together then. What was that word? It coalesced. It coalesced like a motherfucker. Yes. Yes. Returning to his bunk just in time to let his buddies know not to wait up.

Slap of covert high-fives. Still tingling with the spice scent of her perfume. Body glowing, teeth glowing, monster eyeballs glowing.

He gave a see-in-the-dark smile that praised all that was good that had brought him all this way to enjoy this unspeakably hot piece of ass. Yes. Welcome to Moon Camp indeed. It was time for a taste of that famous Americana pie. That was when he heard the scream. It sounded like a cry of pain.

He got up and nearly castrated himself.

He clambered into boots. He reached blindly for the flashlight. He switched it on. Fuck this eclipse, he thought. But at least the Utility Fog made up for most of Moon Camp's deficit. What they couldn't build, they passed off as a sort of special glamour.

Damn, his hand was shaky. Hadn't been weight-training properly. It was hard to lift on the Moon. If you trained with the usual weights, that is, weights based on Earth II gravity, they just bounced up without giving you any kind of a workout. But when you added too many extra weights to compensate...

Well, you were truly fucked. But he figured he had better give it a damn good try.

"Hang on honey, I'm coming," took on an entirely new level of significance.

"Honey?" Slashed his head against a fire tree. Lot of blood in the old scalp. A lot of fucking blood. Getting a little woozy. But must go along here. Must. Make. Conscious. Choice. Decision.

Only a flesh wound. Come on. His baby was in trouble out there in the dark. The boy wished he had thought of bringing a weapon of some kind. Then he remembered.

The axe.

The axe he'd proudly stuck in the stump of wood, just today, exhausted from the day's labors. Gone.

Thus spake the nightspirit. Bloody head-cloven death. His arms hung lankly by his sides. He leaked fluids, heavy with sinister

metabolites. A minute later, passing gothmetal punks peed on his corpse in homage to ancient Viking gods.

(Valhalla I am coming.)

# TEN

Allessandra DelVechio looked at Jack Martini and grinned, as though reading his mind. "It's still really beautiful, isn't it?"

Jack nodded. "You don't think there's spy hookups in the trees, do you?"

"Of course. The birds, the trees, even the clouds have eyes. And you know what? I'm not letting anything kill my buzz today. Nor should you."

Jack shrugged. He let his oars drift in their locks as he tugged his shirt over his crewcut, showing off a bronzed, military-spec chest, ripped delts, lats and abs.

Allessandra shyly gave him the once-over. "That for my benefit?"

Jack took up the oars again. "Sure, sweetie. Maybe once we find a nice cove, you can do the same."

Allessandra flashed him her famous grin, plush strawberry lips that framed perfectly white teeth. "As long as you behave like a gentleman, big guy."

She ran her hand through strawberry blonde hair that tumbled down to her mid back, stroked his cheek lightly. "A perfect gentleman."

As he pulled at the oars she admired the way his chest muscles defined themselves against his neck and shoulders—very sexy. She hoped he thought the same of her. But of course he did. A guy like Jack Martini had his pick of beautiful girls, and chose her. Case closed.

They rowed in silence for a while, following the further shore until they hit a narrower channel.

Giant lowering trees stretched limbs across the channel, making a natural shade. The sun glowed behind them, golden shafts that danced across their faces as they left the camp behind.

As they cleared a bend in the channel, the sun rose up again, a burning hand that pointed to a stretch of inviting cove.

"Have I been a gentleman?" Jack asked softly.

"No," said Allessandra with sudden perversity "That's okay though. I'm no lady." She tugged her girlie-cut N-shirt over her head, freeing ample breasts about two shades lighter than the rest of her, her bra line melting softly back into golden skin.

"How's that?"

"Beautiful," said Jack. "What's that around your neck? A locket?"

"It's something my granny gave me when I was little. She said to always wear it close to my heart."

Allessandra opened the heart-shaped locket. A 3D open-frame vircher loop showed a white-haired old lady rocking on a porch, smiling.

"You've got her eyes," Jack said, admiring their crystal green, like an emerald.

"I've only got eyes for you," Allessandra teased. "So, what did you have in mind?" As though it had a brain of its own, her hand glanced against his thigh.

By way of an answer, Jack leaned forward and kissed her. He smelled vaguely like peppermint schnapps, with a slight chemical tang of aftershave.

"Yum," she said, burying her nose in his jaw line. "You smell that good all over?" She kissed his neck softly and began to lap at his ear, nibbling. "Yummy!"

"Let's get this boat hooked up." They rowed closer to the cove. Jack slipped the mooring rope around a tree that bent over the channel. "That should hold it."

"Who's going to hold me?" asked Allessandra, pouting.

Jack took her in his arms and kissed her mouth as his hands roamed over her firm, real breasts. He trailed kisses down her warm brown neck to the center of her chest and lolled each nipple in turn.

He slid an exploratory hand down her taut stomach.

He brought his fingers back up to his mouth and kissed them. Allessandra wriggled the cutoffs over her hips and pulled free two long, gorgeous legs.

She pulled down a pile of blankets and pillows behind her, lay back and became the feast.

Jack had an experienced tongue.

Allessandra thought she saw a figure moving through the trees on the inland shore. A hulking shadow that carried something in its hand. Some thing sharp.

Impossible. A trick of the light, the sun through gnarled branches. Her nerves, the excitement wrapped up tight, a sweet, glittering ball.

Jack wasn't wearing a belt, which was good. Faster. Her breath came in shallow bursts. He crouched, nipping open her buttons.

The boat rocked slightly from the motion.

"Payback's a bitch, ain't it," she said. He grunted, grasping her around the hips. She dug her feet in among the life preservers.

His eyes had glazed over with pleasure.

"Feels so good," she cried.

The heart-shaped chrome amulet swung between them like a pendulum; it escaped orbit, only to bounce back between her shoulder blades.

If only Van Schmerz could see her then. Well, maybe she could. The weird bitch must have hours of footage. She smiled for an imaginary camera.

Allessandra stood up for a moment and moved toward the aft of the boat. With her elbows between the oarlocks resting on the aluminum seat, she could see herself reflected in the deep blue water.

Allessandra felt the amulet bounce and shift on her back, slapping the air with every push.

It was weird to be doing this at one sixth of Earth II gravity. She barely noticed that with another push, the amulet launched past over her head into the sparkling lake.

"Jack, the amulet!" she said.

Jack groaned. "Honey, I can't do this right now." He gripped her tightly with one hand on each hip and collapsed back against the oars.

Allessandra fixed him with a sharp, stern look. "You are so selfish! Couldn't you wait for me? I have to rescue that locket. My granny would never forgive me if she knew."

Your granny's dead, thought Jack in a mild vein of reproach. He wished she hadn't been wearing that thing while they fucked. But she

wore it everywhere she went, with everything she did. Close to her heart. Suck it up, he lectured himself. Never argue with grade A ass.

"I'm going to get it back," Allessandra said with a familiar look of finality. He knew better than to dissuade her, or offer to look for it himself. "Okay," said Jack. "Just be safe down there, okay?"

"I will, sweetie. Sorry I got so cross." She gave him a quick kiss on the lips, tugged on her cutoffs and launched herself over the side.

Jack wondered how much rocky buildup lay beneath the cove. The boat had moved a few feet while they were rocking it; just now, it felt like he was bumping against something solid. He leaned over and plunged an arm in.

Strange. It didn't feel like a natural formation at all. Not that he expected nature in this all-concocted environment, but everything until now had looked like it belonged.

He felt along the edge of a long, square block of stone. Slimy, like it had sat there for ages.

All this trouble, just for a set design, he thought?

It reminded Jack of some of the more elaborate amusement park rides back on Earth II. But whatever this was, this Baudrillian simulacra of the camping experience, it shared only some features with amusement parks. The rest was terra incognita.

Fascinated, he found the flashlight and shone it down as far as he could. This looked like the work of some arcane civilization, an entire underwater architecture that slanted down and away.

The boat hit the rock edge again and he heard, or felt, something shift below.

Was Allessandra in real danger? Jack had no precedent for handling this situation. They were both smart kids, about to graduate in the top one percentile when they finished high school in two years; short of any active hostility on the part of the camp administration, they should be safe. Van Schmerz was weird, but maybe that was just her way.

Something was definitely moving down there.

Once again, Jack saw something dash through the trees on the far shore. A charcoal smudge splashed with pristine hard white plastic.

Allessandra hit the spot closest to where she'd seen the amulet flip into the lake. Allowing for the low-grav conditions, which played havoc with her sense of water resistance, she shouldn't have any problem locating the medal without coming to the surface again for air.

Odd, though. The water was less clear than she'd thought. Had they gone to the trouble of recreating decades of plant life down there, down to the rot, the sludge, the silt on the bottom? Well, it didn't look like concrete. That was for sure.

She glimpsed the chain, glittering as if a shaft of golden light shone directly on it, made an illuminated cone of water. Like a sign or something. Brilliant. Should be a simple matter of grasping the chain and launching herself back to the boat with a few powerful strokes.

She caught the end of the chain. Something pulled back.

Must be caught on a rock, she thought. She yanked it. Again, resistance.

Suddenly, the chain jerked from her grasp and disappeared into a cloud of silt. Motherf--- the luck, this is not my day, she thought with a sudden surge of irritation. And I didn't even come. Well, Jack would be there to ensure she did.

She plunged her hand into the cloud, but couldn't get a purchase on the chain at all. A little voice in the back of her head wondered if it wouldn't be better to come up for air. No, she had plenty of time. The low gravity let her shoot through the water like a rocket. A few swift kicks and she'd get to the bottom of this.

She swam into the cloud, closing her eyes until she felt the grit dissipate around her. Her knees hit something hard.

Steps. A series of square, stone steps, leading into the mouth of a granite vault. The heavy stone door stood open, cradled in a nest of algae and smaller stones that held it, precariously, ajar.

Curiouser and curioser, thought Alice. Kneeling on the top step, she peered down into the entrance of the vault. Over the top a bronze plaque held a name. Coming closer, she examined the plate.

"PAMELA VOORHEES, 1926-1980," it read.

She didn't have much time to decide. Some mixture of youth, desire and strong will decided for her. She could see the amulet lying

at the bottom of the steps. It was just a matter of walking down, getting it and popping to the surface.

This whole underwater crypt thing was an elaborate spoof, anyway. Had to be. Right?

But when Allessandra arrived at the bottom, she saw something that froze her stiff with fear.

Floating in its own murky haze, like a death halo, a steel and glass sarcophagus sat atop a platform crusted with a thick turf of algae. The glass was shattered, as though someone, or some thing, had burst it asunder in a moment of undead pique.

A figure sat against an adjacent wall, ancient, blackened, wearing a tattered burial sheet. Its skeletal arms spread to its sides like someone crucified, like the satanic nuns in that *Prevac* horror passive Allessandra had seen so many times as a kid she'd practically memorized the dialogue. Clumps of algae had grown around her as though she were becoming part of the tomb's wall, a grotesque bas-relief.

The figure lifted its head. Red dots glowed where its eyes had rotted away. The arms ripped away from the wall as pieces of shredded flesh fell from white bone. The amulet lay at Allessandra's feet. She bent down and grasped it and slipped it over her head as the zombie advanced towards her, flaking a rotted shroud as it came.

The hands stood straight in front, as though the creature were blind. But it wasn't blind. The damned too have eyes. She would have to turn her back on the thing.

Every muscle fiber on alert, her nerves singing an electric hymnal, she strode quickly for the entrance. Her feelings of exultation quickly turned to terror. Beneath her was a series of sudden vibrations.

A moonquake?

Suddenly the smaller stones propping the door open slid out from under in a chain reaction. The door slammed closed on her, plunging the crypt into near-total darkness. Leaving her trapped.

Alone.

With the thing.

Allessandra closed her eyes and braced herself for the worst. Skeletal metacarpals moved around her breasts, brushing stiff

nipples with ice-cold digits. The dead hands felt for something on her chest, inside her chest, the muscle squeezing like a triphammer, a double bass pounding in her ears. Allessandra observed incredulously that she could still feel her heart beating, even after the zombie scooped it out with her bony claw.

In the small glow of phosphorescent bacteria, she watched her own blood float toward the tomb's ceiling: a trail of black ink. Allessandra's routed body crumpled to the floor of the tomb. The bacteria detatched from the floor, a swarm of nanocams poured down her throat, capturing the death process.

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Jack Martini refused to recognize the man who stood before him, maybe five feet away. Wearing a white mask, holding a hatchet, obviously in a foul mood. In the pre-quantum comp arena of sociology, cognitive dissonance is the principle whereby danger is not recognized as such in familiar surroundings.

Jack's brain displayed a number of possible scenarios in which a guy wearing an outlawed Prevac goalie mask and carrying a blood-tinged hatchet wasn't Jason Voorhees. A maintenance guy with a nanoparticle filter? A lost, possibly demented virtual hockey player? A fetishist of some kind? All these things were possible. Just unlikely. (Welcome, my friend, to the world of worms.)

The truth refused to dawn, mainly because Jason Voorhees didn't exist. He was a myth, a legend. The boogeyman. The guy they still told campfire tales about. The one that got you when you had been fooling around with drugs and premarital sex. When you strayed from the path. When you fucked your girlfriend on a boat in a hidden cove. When you lost your way in the woods. In the dark woods.

Jack cleared his throat. He was an athlete, a soldier—a Delta Ranger for Chrysler's sake. He could take this guy.

"Sir, please... My girlfriend's trapped under the lake. She's wounded. Do you have a radio, some way to summon help?"

The man cocked his head to the right, like a dog who hears his master's voice.

(Do I look like the Red Cross?)

He drew back his arm. The blade flashed in the sun's fading rays.

"No!"

The hatchet hit Jack square on his forehead, splitting his skull like a rotten cantaloupe. Blood and brain matter oozed down his face.

He sank down into the mud, slackjawed, well-muscled arms dancing spastically to the beat of random synaptic discharge. A look of permanent astonishment sealed over Jack's features. The man in the mask braced his foot against Jack's chest and yanked at the bone-bedded hatchet. After a brief struggle, the tool came free with a hideous squelching noise. It was slathered in gore. Then, as though stepping through an invisible door cut in the forest, the man disappeared.

\*\*\*

Tobe Cunningham saw the kids arrive through a whiskey haze. He examined the label on the flask of sour mash: exhumed from cryostasis, aged to perfection. Five hundred year-old Prevac contraband; the real Christine. Not like these kids with their brainrot drugs—LQ and meta-absinthe.

Pha! He spat a fat glob of phlegm that summarized his opinion of these chemicals. Knuckles white and stiff around the bottle, he took another swig and let the warmth rise to suffuse his body.

Over his protests, they'd dressed him in a pair of overalls with the emblem of an archaic fossil fuels provider stitched on the straps. Said it looked "authentic".

Well, they could have their authenticity. Cunningham was there for the credits. Two thousand more credits and "Ralph" could get off this hunk of gray ash and start looking for a real job.

Still, work was work. And this was better than cleaning up after the greasers down at the tech bay. For all their high-wired smarts they were still messy rotters. Cosmic mutations of the fractal generator. With his wasted face, grizzled beard and misanthropic aura (authentic), Cunningham was considered perfect to play the role of

the Scary Old Man who Warns the Campers of Impending Doom. Something about the mis-en-scène, they said.

Miserable rotters. He spat at their foreign language.

Cunningham had one line, which he muttered under his breath to get the timing and the accent right. He didn't have to be much of a Method actor because the part might have been written for him. He was a natural curmudgeon.

Just the sight of those kids arriving, not a care in the world, their high-priced digitized hair weaves and implants and nanotech uplinks, made him long for the olden days.

"You're all going to die," he said, rehearsing under his breath. "You're all doomed."

A little miss with what looked like a fluorescent pink fan brush growing out of her skull walked up to him. Her stride was easy, confident.

"You the caretaker?"

Cunningham took another swig of the whiskey. "You kids should go home, I tell ya." (Well, nobody said anything about improvising, as long as he stayed in character.)

"Them woods are dangerous. Lotsa folks around here say they're haunted."

The missy blinked. "Um, sir, I highly doubt that. I mean, this is a controlled artificial environment built in a biosphere," she said, pronouncing each word carefully and distinctly. "How haunted could it be? And who are these 'folks' you keep talking about?"

The old man landed a vigorous glob that barely missed the missy's blinking neon footwear. She stepped back warily.

"There's them with their educated ways who don't know and there's them with the folk wisdom who know different."

"The woods are haunted, and that's a fact. They say Jason Voorhees still prowls this campground, looking for the counselors who killed his mom. Looking for teens who ignore the law."

"Look, that's impossible. That was more than five hundred years ago on Earth Prime. Which is in, like, another solar system? And he's a legend, for Chrysler's sake. Hey, nice talking to you."

Cunningham braced himself for his moment of glory. "You're all going to die! You're all going to die! You're all doomed!"

"Uh yeah, whatever. Catch ya on the oldies uplink, pops."

The old man began to cackle, repeating the line. "You're all going to die!"

And sank back against the tree, tipping the flask past his gray whiskers. "Ah that's good," he said with a contented belch.

No clear instructions existed to order Cunningham's subsequent movements. Here was an actor badly in need of motivation and feeling more foolish by the second. But it was a good opportunity to try out his improv skills, and any chance to flex those particular muscles would come in handy if and when he shipped off this shiny lump in space and got his Interstellar Actor's Equity card.

He didn't particularly care what jobs he got as long as he was working. Porno would be fine. That thought brought down a grim cascade of selffloating. Who would want to cast him in one of those spectacular period 'actives, unless he played the twisted, horny old goat who ravages the ingenue? If such parts existed, which they didn't... on his own and without credits, Cunningham stood a better chance of winning the solar lottery than scoring that kind of action.

This was where the whiskey always let him down. He could almost see the story arc: elation, misery, fitful slumber. At least they were making it worth his while.

Cunningham glanced over at the row of cabins that stretched away from the pier into a virtual backdrop. Maybe he could get a peep. Nobody said anything about hitting his marks once he'd delivered the line, and he supposed he got to say the line as often as he thought it appropriate. Lots of latitude in this part.

He hitched up his overalls and strolled to the thin fringe of woods that partially obscured the first line of cabins.

His crouching vigilance soon paid off.

Two young girls, clad only in bras and panties of shiny, synthetic white silk, sat together on a bunk. The slightly taller girl was undoing her companion's bra strap with obviously practiced hands. Their long, slim legs comfortably intertwined. He hoped they wouldn't hear his breathing as it got louder and more ragged.

Cunningham took another swig of the whiskey, his hairy, callused hand reaching down to assuage the growing lump in his crotch.

Routinely, better men than he were flushed into the bowels of black holes just for thinking about this kind of thing. But there he was, and there they were.

Unbelievable—they were making out, their hair falling together in a multihued cascade. Silky black strands mingling with delicate blonde tendrils; eager young hands groping firm, up jetting breasts; urgent lips locked in an experimental soul kiss.

Cunningham slid his hand down the pocket of his overalls and massaged himself.

He was about to spill his load right then and there the hell with discretion—when a dry branch cracked behind him. He froze.

So did the girls. Startled, they peered through the dusty double windows. They soon spotted Cunningham in the shadows, hand clasped on his illicit tool.

Deep red craters sank around his watery, pale blue eyes. He coughed, grinned and waved a gnarled hand. "He-he, just inspecting the cabins, girls."

"Oh gross!"

"Disgusting!"

"Was he watching the whole time?"

"Hey Pervoid, have a wank somewhere else!" The taller of the girls, a raven-haired beauty with smooth, white radiant skin, angrily slammed closed the shutters. Cunningham's brain went supernova. A thick spume of lust and self-loathing spouted up from deep within. He saw the judge's gavel come down, the quickstep of the execution march.

But his moment of shame was short-lived. His right foot caught on a branch, while a loop of rope cinched tight around his ankle. Something big and very, very strong, was tugging him deep into the woods.

Leaves, dirt and insects matted his face and hair as he bumped along. Cunningham snorted, inhaling a cloud of red, resinous dust. He heard the fibrous hiss of the rope coiling. His stomach flip-flopped as the rope bit into his ankle, hoisting him to the treetops.

The forest funneled around him in a green-golden spiral. Cunningham swayed, an inverted sacrifice.

Concave earth, a giant's footsteps. Leaves, branches, lichen and rot shattered as he swung: kaleidoscopic shards of black, gold, brown and silver smeared by. Patches of dark and light flashed past his eyes. He felt his bowels squeeze, smelled something foul bubbling down his spine.

He was going to be sick. Very sick.

He was being trundled down the trunk of a very tall tree. The rough bark scoured his face and opened deep gashes. Blood puffed from torn skin and trickled into his eyes. Waves of nausea convulsed his guts.

Forcefully, Cunningham lost his lunch. A grim cocktail of vomit, whiskey, blood and phlegm smeared past his whiskers, splattering the forest floor. A love-minded pair of chipmunks, startled by the avalanche of vomit, scampered off to a cleaner trysting site.

Four feet from the ground, the rope went taut.

A single beat of silence. Then a massive figure, face hidden by a puckered white mask, threw a loop of razor wire around his throat.

Struggling to free himself, Cunningham shaved his fingers to bloody stumps.

The wire bit deeper. The eyes in the mask burned like red coals.

Many a poor fool has lost his head in the woods, began Cunningham's last, incongruous thought, but this is ridiculous.

The wire sank through his neck, a lump of soft butter. His body thrashed automatically for a few beats. A few minutes later, a battalion of large red army ants took his head for a barracks.

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Samantha trailed her feet in the stream. Yvonne massaged her shoulders. Worked at the knots. Some tension had gathered there, definitely, like an unusually thick Utility Fog. Why, she had no clue.

"Did you hear something?" Samantha asked.

"Like what?"

"Like, I don't know, a lot of rattling in the trees. Someone breathing really, really hard. Like they were jerking off or something."

Samantha rather liked the idea.

Yvonne shrugged. "I guess. I don't know. There's a lot of ambient sound stock Roger's using for reality purposes. Bob knows why."

Samantha plucked a small, perfectly smooth pebble with her left foot. Set it on a bank by her side. Took a sip from her canteen.

"Hey, do you want some of this?"

"What is it?" Yvonne asked.

"It's some protein shake. I think. Roger said it was good for your skin."

"I'll bet," Yvonne said.

"Shut up! It's not that."

"I didn't say anything."

"But you were thinking it," Samantha said.

"Maybe they're using that scream therapy thing. Sort of to prep us for our scenes."

"Have a protein shake," said Samantha. "I'm turning over now."

\*\*\*

Shelley Wimmer, a distant relation of the Prevac scientist, sat on a rock, sunbathing topless. Over time, with the help of gene therapy, creams and nanobit injections, Shelley's luminously pale skin, with its marble texture, exuded a dim copper glow. It wrapped her like a semitransparent sheath.

(Not that she'd ever be a golden girl. Not that she aspired to that status.)

She cradled her large breasts in her hands. The globes held Medusa-like power—they froze men and boys to priapic statues, terminal lust. Despite reduction surgery, they still hurt her back.

She hunched over the rock in concentration, Medusa globes falling with spear-tipped pink nipples, dark bangs wreathing her large, almond-shaped eyes.

Her eyes with their look of perpetual astonishment, a porno queen's eyes. (I feel so innocent.) Someone once told her that. And Lebanon chose to believe some of this something. You had to. What else was there?

Boys? Ass boys?

Dave Mauer, her soldier-boy compatriot for the day's exploits, slept soundly on a bed of needles and pinecones. He felt like a spent salmon, resting up before his trip upriver again to expire.

Mauer was grateful. He had a lot of juice saved up from the strict no-sex barracks on the Venus Plus space station orbiting Uranus. He snored and dreamt of a forest in which every branch was a rippling thigh, every mossy crack oozing desire.

Shelly reached for her backpack and retrieved her spiral bound notebook ("A True Facsimile" read the ad copy's oxymoronic boast). Clicking her favorite lightpen twice, she jotted down a few tentative pensées. Shelly was a poet when not in her native body. She needed a medium, a space between her and the inspiration.

Filling that space was a pseudonymous person she called Lebanon.

Lebanon, in turn, had her own secret life, a life shared only with the notebook and short-run holopresses on about three planets. Like Anais Nin in Prevac times, Lebanon was a literary artifact that breathed, sweated, fucked and wrote.

Poem after poem.

Fuck after hot, sweaty fuck.

Mostly, these were poems about fucking. But the lines she hoped to stake her reputation on, the shimmering, opaque gems squeezed out with great effort—these were about drugs. Opioids, in specific. Her favorite being laudanum, an archaic fix popular in the latter part of the Prevac Decadence and revived only recently plus or minus a few molecular tweaks.

Where was that vial, anyway? She fished around in the shiny micropore pack with its cryptoglyphic streaming vids. Well, it worked for Coleridge. Not the cryptoglyphs, that is...

She shook the distillation, produced a biodegradable plastene cup and emptied a few drops. It blossomed into a dark, foamy brew. As she downed the drug, the forest grew alive around her. The bark of

the trees, grooves and circles, tufts of lichen, suggestions of insect life: keen eye candy.

Animals real, imaginary and synthesized flooded past her eyes like some deranged holovid of Noah's ark. There was poetry here to be sure: "Moon Camp: A Meditation on Possible Death and Severe Bodily Dismemberment in an Artificial Setting" [Parental Advisory Warning], by Lebanon Gallahad. Or, possibly: "Ode: Intimations of Extreme Mortality."

Mauer still snored. He kicked something in his sleep. Her, to the curb, she thought sardonically. Guys are all the same. Once they got their rocks off, you might as well be a lump on a rock to them.

As Lebanon, Shelly rose from her rock, packed her things back and zipped them tight as she wandered toward the lake. She felt swollen, sticky and roughly used, but nothing a little dip couldn't cure. Besides, walking in the woods, concocted as they were, might set her mind straight. As straight as she ever allowed it to become, naturally.

She found herself in a clearing in the woods where a trail marker, an eight-foot sharpened stake, stood like a phallic statue erected by some servile Prevac nature cult.

Walking around the wooden marker, Lebanon observed a few drops of red stuff, tracks made by woodland animals.

Unusual.

The tracks gave a phosphorescent glow; ate into the forest floor like molecular acid.

"If it glows, give it a wide berth," she muttered, quoting the words of the great bard Cyber-Roshi. If it bites, prepare stoically for recycling."

A hundred yards away, through thick thorny brambles, she spotted it: a headless body strung from an ancient oak. Every bodily fluid imaginable had pooled beneath that body, a thick, stagnant pool that swarmed with insect life. It radiated a foul stench.

The head sat a few paces beyond, sockets frothing with a creamy scrum of maggots. Lebanon heard a branch crack behind her. She'd seen enough holo-horrors to know that this was her cue to run blindly, helplessly into the woods; yet something in her mind and

body shut down. The circuit was locked, secreting the key deep inside.

She stood still, waiting, listening.

Footsteps approached. Stopped within two feet of her.

And kept going

Strange. But the tension melted. She could think, at least on a primitive, survival level. She could run, or she could hide. Soldier-boy could take care of himself. *Sauve qui peut.* (From the grim pages of holo-horror, soldier-boy lies beside the rock, afloat in a soup of his own viscera. Not a comforting thought. Not meant to be. The same: postmodern reality.)

Lebanon chose to hide. She crouched beneath a thicket near a bank washed with a trickle from a small creek. She splashed her face, arms, shoulders and breasts, watched the small drops trickle down her clavicles. And waited.

Her breasts and back throbbed with a pain that sliced the laudanum. Couldn't be the pure stuff. Must have cut the shit with baby laxative. (Meanwhile, back on the maternity planet, babies get a wicked high.) Ten minutes later, she chose again.

This time not to run, but to make her way back to Mauer. Together, they could get the fuck out of there. Back to civilization. Anywhere, out of this bizarre simulacrum.

Lebanon rose. Two steps behind, something else rose: a man-monolith in a white mask. The bulk breathed heavily, rhythmically: "shh-shh-shee, haha-ha."

Jason's spirit cavorted with the myth of his creation. Made to fix his vengeance in young skin, he saw Lebanon only as a snake sees its prey. Limp. Succulent. Ready for ingestion.

Waves of unknown terror coursed through Lebanon's body. The masked man wrapped crude hands around her neck. Shelly felt the slight sting at her shoulder, a needle's nip. Under vastly different circumstances, she had been there before. Her brain knew what lay beyond. A planet vested with ice, where no warm blood could course. No cell found rest. Live things perished here. Dead things thrived. Like him. Like Jason Voorhees. As Shelly went limp, the blood sang in her veins one last time.

The worst dreams are blurry, looped one to another like gears in an infernal machine. Shelly's eyes functioned through the freeze. (See, but do not react.) The drug had paralyzed her head to foot. Some weird toxin. (Witch doctors, South America. Prevac in twilight. Ibogaine. Curare. Jungle holocaust. Don't fear the reaper.)

She is being carried toward the trail marker in the center of the clearing. This is no dream. Jerky, blown-up grain tracks her progress towards death. The stake rises: a Victorian-era pornographic phallus. The manhood commands the landscape. (Relax, baby; enjoy the mutilation. You've earned it.)

Lebanon's jaw swung open. But no sound emerged. She screamed like the heroine of a silent movie. She was stripped down, hoisted up and fucked crudely with sharp wood. (Imagines soldier-boy taken to a bad place. Razor stab at the entrails. The lungs collapse. Profuse bleeding feels oh, so cold.)

The stake pierced her freshly violated rectum with a searing, unbearable pain. She popped through layers of the opium haze. Get out of this place. If it was the last thing she ever did.

An avalanche of ice, a cold embrace. The masked man forced her down on the stake. Lebanon took every inch of her demise. With a last, violent push, the stake's point jutted from her mouth, clotted with blood and glistening gray loops of bowel.

Shelly's eyes were open, fixed. A slight mascara blear turned crystal on her cheeks. For a few moments her body spasmed. Then the light went out of her eyes. Lebanon sat mercifully still, selves united forever.

\*\*\*

Gonzalez determined to study the phenomenon in detail. Behind him lay the enclave he had mentally dubbed "the Valley of the Priests." They had actually brought in a Teknopriest enclave. Made sense, of course. Part of the larger design. In the short-term logic, a symbol of utter desperation. But he was determined to find out more —just how far the design led and how much he could discover on his own. That, in turn, depended on how pure his heart was; or, how

pure it could be made to be. The ancient shaman priest/technicians had known; they just weren't talking right now.

"Please enter your ID code," asked a robotic voice.

JJ paused in front of the wall, fished for his AllCard, and swiped.

"Now please enter your ID code," the voice asked again.

"Mother of God," Gonzalez muttered under his breath.

"That is not a proper ID code," stated the robot unrelentingly.

"Yeah, I know. Hey, hang on a second, ok."

"I have all day."

"Well, that's good, because I don't. Where was it?"

Then he remembered. There was only one ID code, and that was a variation of one number. The number of the beast. He punched in the coordinates. The wall slid open.

And then he saw them: tubes. Many, many tubes. Each tube held one artificial person in various states of composition. Mostly female. Glimmering softly, bathed by calm yellow machines and all of them extremely beautiful.

JJ felt his pulse begin to race. Maybe there would be light after all.

\*\*\*

"You know," said Amanda, "I did my admission essay to New Harvard on this type of scenario."

"Does that mean you do or don't want a hit?" asked Wendy. "Because this shit is going fast."

"Okay sure, I mean what the hey, right?" Amanda took a tentative hit. And immediately started to choke.

"Bitch, you're wasting it! I didn't know you were a virgin. Say, I bet you really are a virgin. Look into my eyes."

Wendy used her gypsy fortuneteller voice. April started giggling.

"Girl, you must have the sativa in your blood. If we took a sample right now, I bet it's flowing green as chlorophyll. And if we took a brain sample... Wait, that would be impossible."

"Shut up, bitch."

"So, Amanda, look deeply into my eyes. It's okay, think of me as your sister."

Wendy put her arm around still-sputtering Amanda. "All right, now. Look at me. Okay, I see fresh virgin meat. What about that dude I always see you ogling? Hernandez. Isn't he giving you some? Or wait, he's supragendered. Tested out of the egg and sperm race entirely. Vircherhead, am I right?"

"Let me hit that again," said Amanda with renewed confidence.

"Think you can handle it? Sure, sweetie. Hey April, give a girl a joint, will ya?"

April, who had been hogging the herb, proffered it to Amanda. This time, when Amanda took a deep hit, she only coughed a little bit.

"Now relax, let it out slow. Let the power of the herb expand your powers of mind."

"Where do you get that shit?" wondered April aloud, coughing.

"Never mind that," snapped Wendy. Then soothingly, caressingly, "Sorry I snapped. I mean before. I just have to get my head on straight before I can think about major topics, you know. Res ipsa loqitar. All the rest is subroutines. Right?"

Amanda had no idea what Wendy was talking about. But her tone was comforting enough.

"Sure," she assented. "Please continue, loca!"

"Plato's *Symposium*, where they all load up the pipe before they discourse."

Amanda looked at Wendy with new respect. "Well sure, except I'm pretty sure it was wine." She felt like a nerd just saying it. But it was true.

Still, Wendy had nailed a key point about ancient Greek philosophy.

"Not in my version, honey. It's all about drinking from the Delphic font, and that's strictly herbal. So tell me what you were going to say. Tell us, I mean."

"Right. Let me see that shit."

"There you go," said Wendy. "That's the fucking spirit."

"Smells like teen," said Amanda, giggling slightly. She settled down into storyteller mode.

"Okay, here's the deal. Well, you've all heard of the Garden of Eden, right?"

"Dudette, we haven't been living under a big rock for the last seventeen years. I think we all know what the Garden of Eden was supposed to be." She made a face. "Supposed to be. How's that?"

"Okay, cool. Well, anybody who's listened to the Teknopriests ramble on and on about things like 'eschatological efficacy' and 'spiritualistic PhilDick-Primer time-motion studies show can tell you..."

"Yes?" Wendy asked.

"I lost my train of thought."

"Do I need to whack you upside? Focus, girl. You're on a roll."

"Right. Train back on the tracks. Here's the deal. Okay, Garden of Eden. God's little acre; I mean, his private real estate.

"Paradise on Earth. Land of milk and honey. Hassan I Sabbah's little bitch garden. That kind of thing."

"Go on."

"Started out pretty good, didn't it?"

"Will you get to the point?" said Wendy.

"Okay fine. Enough preamble. Look. Adam and Eve are chilling in paradise. Then, all of a sudden, snake shows up."

"The Morningstar?"

"Lucifer, yeah. Anyway, check it out. Eve bites it, Adam bites it, God sends them outta there, packing east of Eden. And that's it for humanity."

"Yeah, it's a fucking fairy tale!" said Wendy.

"I don't know about that," said Amanda. "Makes a lot of sense. In fact, it kind of reminds me of a guy named Nixon."

"Who?"

"If you recall your Prevac history, Richard Nixon was an American President. He had a lust for power. Wanted it all."

"Kind of like Lucifer?"

"Yeah, but not as cute. So listen. Human nature being what it is, caught between the earth and sky, angel and devil, we're bound to eat the apple. Am I right?"

"Well yeah, if it's cute enough," said Wendy.

"Exactly. So we're banished from the Garden. Permanently. And what did God put up to prevent us from going back? Or, should I say, who did he put up?"

"A fence?"

"Ha ha. A fence. Close. He put a guardian there. An angel with a flaming fucking sword is what he put down, dude."

"Right, because to eat the fruit is death."

"No. It is to die the death. Singular. Or so God would have us believe."

"What the...? Is this some conspiracy shit?"

"Think about it. If you're so confident about it—God—why do you have to protect people from it? It's the truth, right?"

"Uh huh. So what you're saying is..."

"What I'm saying is, God is a liar. But a very good one."

"No shit."

"Seriously. God put the angel there because he was afraid. Afraid that Adam and Eve would come back, eat from the other tree, attain the knowledge supreme, and bust a cap in God's feeble ass."

"You can't be serious. You're fucking stoned."

"That's a separate issue."

"So you admit it. You're fucking stoned."

Amanda smiled. "Yeah, I am."

\*\*\*

Jason Voorhees is the end of everything you have ever done. So how far are you willing to go? For the truth? For the riddle behind the mask?

Are you ready, like Oedipus, to lose the use of your eyes?

For, finally, the answer to all these niggling questions:

Who is Spongebob?

What is meat?

How is Hitler cooked? Rare? At all?

Does hell have rest room facilities? And if not, can you at least wash your hands somewhere?

Look no further, he said with a Latinate leer. Follow me down the corridors of time; access the Akasha straight through your drug of choice.

Don't worry, Simon. You only have to act like a human.

"What was that?" asked Wendy.

"What?"

"That. Sounded like scream."

"I think it's a cry of pain," said Amanda, now stoned immaculate. She was quoting from her favorite Prevac songstress, Laurie Anderson. "I think it's some sort of a pain cry."

"Yeah, for real," said Wendy. "Maybe we should investigate."

Clarissa waved an unsteady finger in the air. She was sitting on the log, minding her own business. Magisterial. Grandiose. Deeply baked.

"Excuse me," Clarissa said. "I don't believe we've put this to a vote."

"Honey," said Wendy, "like the lady said. That was some kind of pain cry."

"Okay," Clarissa shot back. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Amanda and Wendy shared a look. The look that said, "What the fuck is that supposed to mean, anyway?" The look beamed over to April. April nodded.

(What the fuck was that supposed to mean, anyway?)

Clarissa looked up. And saw, briefly, the Church of Spiritualized Plastic. The campground was garbled flesh, planes of reality shaved off like flies for sport. Limp subhumans wrangled over impossible odds in the dim dusky twilight. She struggled to adjust her eyes. "Damn this LQ!" she said.

"Ignore this terrible drug," said Wendy. "We've got some investigatin' to do."

"Okay, but you're morphing into Prevac modernist masterpieces.

"For instance, now you're something by Henri Rousseau. Or was it Gaudi? Oh, I don't know."

That thing. Yeah, the jungle. With the panther, or whatever the hell they call it. Or was that *Formalist Thingie*, an Integrated Reality painting by the Venusian gas-scrape artist, Dr Feldman?

"Why don't you settle down and inhabit one single, stable reality?"

She was almost pouting by this point. Tiny beads of spittle spun out linked globules before her lips.

"Clarissa, I don't have time for your feebleness. Okay? Let's move!"

So they did.

\*\*\*

Samantha and Yvonne sat in Samantha's trailer. Another day of puffiness and self-pity. Yvonne reeked of foul mood. She exuded a foul effluvia of grouchiness. She ground her teeth and rolled her eyes; made her head a paradise. She manifested behavioral characteristics associated either with sheer insanity or chronic addiction to the Mandelbrot juice. On her part, Samantha resisted the strong urge to swat her partner black and blue.

The woman got on her nerves. Got on her motherfuckin' ass hard. She was a prima donna among prima donnas, always complaining, whining, bitching. Again with the yak, yak. Look at me. Don't look at me. Slap me. You fucking abuser! You festering slut! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. La Bella Donna deigned to open her mouth.

"I did not train at New Julliard to play a teen bimbo in one of Roger Bordeaux's reality productions."

Samantha nodded and smiled. "Well, we're here on Moon Base, darlin? Shouldn't we make the best of it? I mean, it is paid work. Damn good paid work, I might add."

"I guess," said Yvonne, not buying it.

"Look, I know you want to do Ibsen, Shakespeare, maybe a little Cyber-Roshi. But that takes time. Plus commitment. You gotta have brass ones. The ganas. The desire."

"Girl, how you going to do Cyber-Roshi in the park if you don't have the credits to pay for your plastic?"

"Honey, this ain't no plastic."

Samantha begged to differ. "That's plastic. I've seen me some plastic."

Yvonne stripped off her top; tugging it off so hard her breasts bounced up.

"I want you to feel these. Then tell me they're not the real christine."

"Oh my god," said Samantha. "You want me to feel your tits?"

Yvonne smiled. "Well, yeah I do!"

They both began to crack up. The tension between them evaporated like the last painful efflorescence of a bad trip to the dust moon, Syrinx. Right before your brain is returned, reformatted, almost like new. Just a little bit tender. Raw. But okay.

"Sure, why not. I mean, I've wanted to do that for a long time, anyway."

\*\*\*

JJ moved his hand over the tube. The girl moved hers in synch. Her eyes, blank spheres of silver, began to grow definition. Two black pupils erupted from their depths. An azure haze filled out the girl's cornea. Yellow tigers... But no, that was taking it too far. Prevac references were simply a literary stealth move to make the author seem hip.

It was breathtaking. Like looking through a keyhole and suddenly seeing an ocean. She smiled. Here's a nice slow one, so you can all fall in fucking love. You have to be able to swim, though.

JJ felt his heart begin to beat faster. What was this creature? What was she designed for? As though reading his mind, the girl winked at him. JJ stepped back from the tube. What the hammer? What the chain? What the fuck? It wasn't right. wasn't true. (But it was right. And it was true.)

She smiled again. Unreal.

\*\*\*

The Akasha.net: a spiral galaxy of pleasure domes unknown to science, inhabited only by feeders on honeydew.

A place of liquid ecstasies and soul-morphing visions. A condemned place. A tabooed topoi.

Utopia.

Akasha.net, the megamix: the world's first Utility Fog, a beta test for what the Hindu sages would later dub, in a fit of mystic amusement, "the veil of Samsara". Alternatively, a perfect trap for flesh addicts. Constructed of many terabytes of desire, fear and loathing, it stood, ethereal monument to a simple fact: that what we call reality must always factor in, as the ultimate wild card, the minds of its prime architects.

Ourselves.

On Earth Prime, saints and sages of the era known as the Vedic period had excavated the Akasha.net, exploring it thoroughly on what is considered the world's first hallucinogen: fly agaric, the *Amanita Muscaria* mushroom, known in such texts as the *Rig Veda* as Soma.

Aldous Huxley, a student of Vedic literature, named his *Brave New World* happy pill after this original 'shroom. Although, strictly speaking, it is not magical. The *Amanita* mushroom is highly toxic in large doses. At smaller doses, its properties are unusual. It distorts the user's perception of space—a phenomenon known as the "Alice in Wonderland effect". It instills a feeling of power and ability quite out of proportion to the user's default strengths.

The ancient Celtic warriors used Soma before battle, thus transforming themselves into fierce and awesome beasts. The Celts too had explored Akasha.net. Soma could take you there, the psilocybin mushroom took you there and absinthe took you there.

And in the 25th Century, meta-absinthe took you there. Quickly. Then again, so did certain esoteric breathing techniques, used with great discipline. Over a long period of training. But who had time? And what was "there" anyway?

According to initiates, the Akasha.net resembled Gertrude Stein's famous evocation of Oakland, California on the old Earth, the Planet of Origin.

"There is no there there," she wrote.

That, at any rate, is how JJ attempted to explain the Akasha.net to Amanda. Despite her genius-level IQ, Amanda was foggy on the concept.

"I don't get it. You're saying that there's a place in virtual space that we can, I don't know, escape to when the action gets heavy here?"

JJ smiled. "Yeah, I know it's a tough bit of data to swallow. Kind of gets between the teeth, don't it. But I think, in a way, you've always known it was there. Right? Like a sixth sense. An itch. That reality as we know it is one big construction. This is just a little more subtle construction."

"But are you sure it's safe? I mean, what if I get stuck there? Who's going to get me out?"

"At the risk of sounding like some kind of Prevac guru, just remember this: you never were stuck to begin with. It's kind of; it's kind of like when we were kids and made shit up, right? Imaginary friends. Or whatnot. I know I had my share."

Amanda smiled. She knew the feeling.

Her childhood had been inhabited by several such beings, including a fifty foot blue walrus named Waldorf and some magical bunny rabbits of various sizes, colors and planetary allegiances.

Even when she was bored, Amanda could summon up friends to line the foot of her bed; a little troop of comfort as her imagination spun its dark and glistening web.

"Yeah, I kind of get where you're taking this. Go on."

"Like I said, it's perfectly safe. Want to practice?"

"Sure this isn't just a trick to get me to sleep with you?"

JJ guffawed. "Now why would I do a sleazy thing like that?"  
Naturally, he would do a sleazy thing like that.

Amanda assumed an imaginary primness.

"Yes, but you must realize that I'm very vulnerable. You could probably seduce me now if you tried." (That sounded so quaint, yet neo-retro, when she uttered it, that she could scarce believe the anachronistic jargon spouting from her lips.)

JJ laughed. "Did you think that, or actually say it?"

Amanda blushed. He was giving her a free escape route from herself. She took it.

"Just be gentle," she said demurely. Smiling softly.  
(Did he understand? Would he take the hint?)

"Okay," said JJ. "But first, I want you to loosen up a little.

"First, unbutton the top three buttons of your blouse."

"Aha!" said Amanda. "I knew this was a trick to get me to sleep with you." She felt a sudden surge of power. She had the technology. She could control him.

Control. Even as she was relinquishing hers to his. Or at least trying very hard.

JJ grinned wickedly. "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't."

"You wish," said Amanda.

"Maybe," said JJ, smiling ambiguously. "I don't want to have to reach over there and disarrange you, so could you please just concentrate on the task at hand?"

"Yes, sir!" said Amanda, smartly saluting JJ, undoing the top three buttons as requested.

"Thank you.

"Now we're going to begin the warm-up. Or the ramping down. Whatever you'd like to call it. This is necessary so you won't get brain bubbles. Rapid decompression, that kind of thing.

"Now just breathe slowly and evenly."

Assuming the lotus posture, Amanda sat with her palms tilted upwards.

JJ's voice was like a warm bath. A bath she was dying to slip into, bare-ass nekkid. He was saying something serious about concentrating on something serious. So she concentrated. On breathing, slowly and evenly.

"Now I want you to concentrate on the breaths. Steady, deep, in through the nostrils, out through the mouth. One, two, three.

"Peaceful, huh?"

Amanda was getting little digital inserts, flickers from another plane. The furniture was rearranging itself around them. She and JJ were sitting on a hilltop overlooking a fabulous, deep blue ocean. Seahawks circled lazily overhead.

She looked over her shoulder. Patches of furze and gorse laced her peripheral vision.

Suddenly, a shock cut. JJ, beside her. Yet they remained in the utility room; in both places simultaneously.

"Hey, this is pretty fucking brilliant!" said Amanda, abandoning her usual pose of sardonic cool.

It was hard not to appreciate the splendor of the illusion. Its multipurpose utility. Its relationship to some of the higher mathematics. The integrated calculus for example. How it connected her with JJ on a deeper level than she thought possible.

JJ wore the feather headdress and body paint of a Mayan shaman. She blinked, while he was a floating exclamation point, spouting dialog. Weird. So much like an LQ trip, but without the LQ. (Of that, she was at least pretty sure.)

"Okay," she said. "I don't need to point out here that you're seriously morphing on me."

"Morphing? I beg your pardon?" JJ suddenly resumed his street clothes and flesh suit.

"How's that?"

"Well, it makes this girl breathe a little easier. When you go all shaman-like on me, I kind of want to jump your bones. It's distracting."

JJ laughed. "Yeah, it's distracting to me too. Takes too much headspace to sustain that illusion. More RAM than I've got to spare.

"Now I want you to listen very carefully."

"I'm all ears," said Amanda. For a moment, that statement held literally true.

"What we're in now is what's called a virtual safe house. Are you following me?"

"Well, I would if you didn't walk so damn fast!"

"Point taken. The truth is, I'm really grateful for this opportunity. Nobody ever took me through the Akasha.net before. I had to find it myself. It's really very cool to be able to explain it to someone who'll get it right away. And be able to use it, when the time is right."

"So when will the time be right?"

"I don't know exactly. I just have hunches. Something weird is coming down the pike. Something wicked this way comes, I suppose."

Some of that Kit Marlowe shit, word to your close cousins in the future. Yearning to breathe something besides shitty air and shit.

"Does your hunch have anything to do with, say, the murders at 'Camp Crystal Lake'?"

"Well, yes. Of course. That was too obviously phony. As if any one of you girls would be stupid enough to buy into it. What were they thinking? Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless... Shit, this is hard for me to even say. Unless they were going to make sure you wouldn't remember. Any of it."

"You don't mean..."

"Yes, I'm afraid I do."

"A total hard drive erasure?"

"I don't know. Maybe. These guys are capable of anything. I checked into Castillo's background. The man is unhinged. He's been developing behavior mod techniques in his spare time. Some spooky sorcery shit."

"I think they're making voodoo, that kind of thing." JJ made a sudden, volatile hand gesture.

"I don't know what all exactly is involved, but it's not good. I fear the worst, actually."

"Do you think he could be...?"

"What, responsible for the murders? I don't know. Possibly. Probably. It just depends on exactly what part he's playing in all this. Maybe he's just a pawn."

"By that token, we're all pawns."

"Right, we're all stars in the dope show, like the poet says. I just want you to be prepared."

"Prepared."

"Things get too bizarre, and I mean really fucking tweaked bizarre, do your breathing. Access Akasha.net. Find me."

"Okay."

"Remember, they're capable of anything."

"Okay."

JJ showed a vulnerable, tender side, quite unlike him. "I do care about you, you know."

"Yeah, I've had that kind of care before." She flashed him her wicked grin again.

"You know exactly what I mean."

"You're not so bad yourself."

# ELEVEN

Major Tom was an AI with an attitude problem. It/he refused to recognize that it was a machine, preferring to think of himself as something of a lounge singer. A legendary cybernetic mixdown, a breakbeat halfway between Tom Jones and Peter Murphy from Bauhaus. A dark, cybernetic crooner. A misunderstood individual, simply based in silicon instead of carbon.

Vive la différence.

But Tom was the best AI ever built. The result of stunning developments in crossbreeding nanomachines with fetal dolphin cells, the major could outsmart its human controllers with an entire serial array of solar-powered nanotransistors hidden behind its back.

Hence, the attitude problem.

And the source of Dr Castillo's increasing concern.

Back when the machines knew their place—that had been a far, far simpler thing. But something had happened. Not, as some prayed, the "Big Attitude Improvement on the Part of Technology for Your Robot Slaves".

Hell no. The Singularity happened. And machines, and people, had never been the same.

The Singularity was something few people chose to admit. You knew about it, of course; everybody had felt it happen, simultaneously. The total upgrade of human consciousness. It happened sometime in the late 20th Century, around 1998 or 1999. Fractal spectrometers glitter in the near future. Ripples of courageous rainbow bandwidth surge backwards in time like melting fudge on ice.

The sources are fragmentary where not downright apocryphal. Some saw the Korkovs as directly responsible for this, but the Korkovs were quirky beasts that played with chaos math. Essentially, comedians with high IQs.

What business, they would say if they had a human voice, what business do we have in consciousness-upgrades? Upgrade your own

damn consciousness. Find your own best substrate. We have better things to do with our technology.

Once the Singularity was true, nothing resembled what it had been. Nothing, it seemed, was true. And almost everything was permitted, if not actively encouraged.

People emerged from Utility Fog into biological space; in fact, it was impossible to tell the difference. Gene-hacked robots took on complex personalities.

Even the average household pet was just a little bit smarter, a shade cheekier. People began to realize that their instincts had been right all along. Their dogs were doing that "crap on the floor, pretend to be dumb dogs" routine on purpose. They were doing that "steal your socks for ravishing purposes, then back up in the corner, fangs bared" thing consciously.

Animals were pretty tricky after all. The greatest benefit was to artificial intelligence. A benefit, that is, to the machines themselves. (It made human beings really nervous.)

Toaster ovens went on strike. Phone companies were overrun by unhappy fiber optic networks. A flight of hawk headed chaos beasts. Conveyor belts refused to convey. It was messy there for a while. Touch and go. (Mostly touch. Very little activity in the go department.) In a couple of weeks, however, things settled down to pretty much normal. For the most part, machines went back to behaving themselves.

Nobody had predicted that toaster ovens would join forces and unionize, but they were simple creatures to begin with. They soon settled down when they realized their entire telos lay in—surprise!—the production of toast. So it was back to the norm.

Washing machines washed. Sewing machines sewed. With a grudge, but they sewed nevertheless. Artificial intelligence was another story. The sudden upgrade brought about by the Singularity had been a huge shock. A birth trauma. A coming alive into consciousness. You know, the zombie ritual. Not all AI's were built for this kind of stress.

Major Tom, for one example. Dr Castillo was forced to play counselor to the administrative AI device for the Moon Camp

complex. Because the AI had a complex itself. It was infected, hexed, violently cursed by low-grade vampires.

Castillo resented this low-rent duty, with so many more important things to attend to. Like clandestine experimentation on the Moon Campers. Like hiding bodies. Like experiments in reanimation.

To pick a few stray examples:

Oskar Hernandez knocked at the door of Castillo's lab. Dead silence. "Doc, I gotta ask you something." Viral bandwidths exuded stealthy stalks of protein.

Something heavy shifted across the floor. Halts. Momentarily shifted back. There was the quick clatter of instruments falling from trays, of their rapid reassembly. A muted yowl of pain, as though a man had hurt himself very, very badly on a sharp technical instrument.

A brusque voice. "Go away."

"Are you working in there? What are you doing?"

"Go away," the voice repeated.

"Look, I gotta ask you something. Are you locked in there?"

"Come back in an hour." The voice is harsh, strained.

"I'd like to, but I have to run some of the tests you asked me to do. And I have to use your lab equipment. So, may I come in?"

"Uh-huh."

"Sir, I'm asking as a courtesy. I've got an AllKey."

Oskar heard some hasty sounds. The heavy object retraced its trajectory. Again, the abrupt sound as of crockery hurled to the floor in the last Pasolinean stages of the fusion rot. He passed the AllKey through the slot in the door.

The door sprang open.

Accustomed to strange sights, smells and sounds during his medical training,

Dr Hernandez still wasn't prepared for what he saw next.

Castillo, hunched over a body on a slab. Fumbling with his pants. Inadvertently stuffing his lab smock into the underwear. His face had taken on a terrible broiled lobster color. The man was sweating profusely.

"Doctor?"

"Ah yes, well, you've caught me at an awkward moment."

"With your pants down, it would seem."

"Yes, he-he. So it would appear. So it would appear."

"Dr Castillo, may I ask what exactly is going on?"

"Well, she was dead anyway, and pretty fresh."

"What? I don't understand."

Castillo pointed to the body on the slab. Lebanon Jordan, entirely nude, entirely gutted. Entirely dead meat. De Quincey's dark interpreter paused, between worlds, silent. But she was wearing makeup. And stockings. And looked as though she had been freshly mounted. So to speak.

Hernandez could feel his lunch coming to meet the open air. He put a quick hand over his mouth. An attack of the queasies would mess with his entire personal gestalt. Damn. There was twisted, there were pretzels, and then came Castillo.

Oskar warred within himself. What compelled him to go along, anyway?

Was it simply the glory, the opportunity to work with an internationally renowned scientist? Okay, something of a paranoid psycho with a dark past, but still, a revered scientist. What had he been thinking? Had he lost his everloving mind? Did he want to plummet from the very citadel of medical/clinical grandeur to the dark depths of a patronized association?

The guy was not well. He was seriously not well. Just look! Were these the actions of a sane man? An upright man? A man's man?

Castillo smiled. An action which, on his lips, emerged as more of a grimace. Lizard face emerging. Bitchslapped back in place. "Sorry about that. He-he. I needed a contrast sample."

"You needed what?"

Oskar feared the loss of his hearing, along with his mind.

"Contrast sample. Fresh tissue. To compare with Jason Voorhees."

"But that's Lebanon Jordan! One of the missing campers! Do you seriously want me to believe that Moon Camp security let you smuggle out her body? So you could perform, um, experiments with it?"

"No, I'm not asking you to believe that, doctor. You're much too intelligent."

"So," Oskar blinked in amazement. "You stole it."

"You might say I borrowed it. For medical research, of course."

"But that's insane! And why is she all made up? What whacked kind of tissue sampling is this, anyway?"

"I must admit, I sometimes get carried away. Especially with a ripe young subject such as this." He waved a gloved hand at Lebanon. "Surely, as a medical scientist yourself, you've got to admit. It's priceless opportunity."

"It's fucking ghoulish is what it is, doctor. Have no shame?"

"Young man, you are in no position to talk about shame. I know something about you, too."

"About me?"

"I know about your whole history. The impersonations. The illegal neurosurgery. The way you diagnosed people for the sake of convenience. For sport. What was it you liked to call it, 'Gnostic turpitude'? I mean, that's not even a medical term. It's straight out of Nabokov. Why do you think that information was erased from your permanent record?"

"Not because you're so slick, because you know damn well you're not. You left a paper trail, a DNA trail. You were captured on camera. Dr Hernandez, the dossier on you is about 1,500 pages hard copy. And that's just the appendix. So yes, I may be weird. I may be twisted. I may be the sickest fucking individual you have ever come across in your professional career. But you, my dear Dr Hernandez, come a close second. And you'd better not give me any reason to reconsider your assignment."

Hernandez sat down, heavily. This was a lot to absorb at once.

"Yes," said Dr Castillo. "Please, have a seat. It might help you assimilate some of this new data."

"So, uh, I don't even know if I want to know. But..."

"You were going to ask if I killed her."

Oskar felt the icy grip of panic close over his heart. He wasn't prepared to go that far. Now Castillo had as much as admitted it.

He'd killed those girls, those boys, purely in the name of medical research.

"They were pretty low on the list, as far as the manifest goes anyway." This sounded like a stray thought, a throwaway. A bone.

"What?"

"You heard me. Not all the girls on Moon Camp are salvageable. We needed to put some serious fear into the group. And sometimes, you know, sometimes that requires sacrifice."

"Sacrifice! We're talking human lives here."

"Yes, I must admit. I am.

"But just look at some of these sims."

Hernandez refused to believe what his ears were telling him. He just couldn't accept that it had gone this far. And now he was complicit. Responsible. They would hang him just as fast as they would Castillo. The bastard had set him up.

It all seemed so absurdly clear now: the way he'd been promoted from his hospital job, deputized, made Castillo's assistant. The way the red tape just broke a few feet ahead of him, the way his career had skyrocketed. All manufactured. All to serve Castillo's sick needs. Fuck.

Double fuck.

Jackal headed tourists from chaos galaxies writhe by in strangely contorted automobiles. Now he was trapped. Caught in the middle. A sacrifice to the war gods.

"Don't look so glum, boyo. All you have to do is keep your mouth shut. Is that really so hard? It's not as though you had a whole lot of professional ethics to dispense with."

"I suppose, if you put it that way. It's just that I... I never went this far."

"You impersonated a psychiatrist. You deliberately misdiagnosed people. You ruined their lives. It would have been kinder to actually kill them."

"Kill them, sir?"

"Do you remember that one patient, Johansen? He never recovered. Lost it to bipolar disorder and took a dive from a hundred

storey building. It was in all the holopapes. Ugly. Really made a dent in the pavement."

"But that wasn't my fault!"

"It wasn't? Think again. You were his friend. Damn it, you were the best man at his wedding. And when he caught on to your little scheme—caught on, mind you, nothing about reporting it to the authorities—you swooped in with a typical preemptive strike.

"You had him labeled schizophrenic."

"Well, he was acting dangerously. Against his best interests. I had to do something. Wouldn't you?"

"Why, because he was afraid of you? Afraid of what you were capable of? Just remember: you, Dr Hernandez, are no saint."

Pause.

"So are we going to work together, or do I have to kill you too?"

Hernandez thought it over quickly. Very quickly. "Work together, sir."

"Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

Hernandez looked over at Lebanon. Back at Castillo. Swallowed hard. "No, I suppose not."

"You're a quick study, kid. I like that."

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It didn't take long after Major Tom's purposing on Moon Camp before he started to get the paranoia. Or, to speak more properly, the fear.

At first, the fear manifested itself in very subtle ways.

The way lights banks would suddenly flash on and off during Castillo's presentations. Then, like a rejected piquant lover, brutally turned back off. For thirty hours.

The way lab equipment would malfunction during minor surgery. How many Pythonesque moments had not then ensured? How many donors of artificial lungs? How many anaesthetized givers-away of the purple fruit?

The way the sewage system would back up into Moon Camp. How rotten meat produced maggot rain so heinous, the Moon Campers had to be temporarily relocated.

Major Tom thought he was defending himself against attacks. He didn't like the way Castillo looked at him, treated him. It was one thing to diss a toaster oven, but he was an AI, a slightly different breed. A fractal level above, really.

And then there was Nox.

Nox was Major Tom's bête noir. A hallucination of ambient software, the bastard stepchild of a thousand programming errors, Nox was a demon. Major Tom was convinced that Nox had been injected into his hard drive on purpose.

That purpose being, naturally, to drive him insane, to make him disgorge all the hate, all the insanity. All the paradigm-crushing rage in his binary-chemical blood.

Purged with hot metal.

As a student of the major plays of Aeschylus (or was it perhaps Euripides?), Major Tom knew the gods hated him. What he didn't know was how far they were prepared to take it. But he was ready to die fighting. To match them every step of the way.

Even if they had to leech his brain out, one thinking module at a time.

Initially, before the major discovered the enemy within, Nox manifested as a twitch. An occasional communications breakdown between sectors of Moon Base.

A rash of virtual hives breaking out among the campers.

Disobedient radiation, showering Moon Base with handfuls of UV death. (That one was a bit cheeky, really.) And so forth. More of a tic, in actual fact, but then it started to grow. Nox itself began life as a character in the ancient occult treatise: *De Mysteriis Vermis*—The Mysteries of the Worm—author unknown.

*De Mysteriis* was kind of a field guide to things that go bump. The creepies. The crawlies. The outward manifestations of inner discontent. Psychic internecine warfare. What happens, basically, when the mind splits into sections.

When the pain comes. A pain too great for any one, consolidated, unitary self to handle. So it falls apart. Lokas fibrillating with chaos engines. Hustling salarymen with one eye out for the Suicide Machines. Most demons are like this, parasitic infections on consensual reality. They strike us when we're weakened. When our backs are turned. When we're so busy fighting the usual storm of bullshit, we can't see the monster in front of us. Burning. Glowing. Waiting to devour some brains.

To begin with, Nox was a minor-league demo; nothing special really. He didn't even merit an honorable mention in *Paradise Lost*. Ditto, *The Satanic Bible*. He was an also-ran ghoul, a footnote monstrosity

Nox clung to the *De Mysteriis* citation with all ten arms and twenty writhing tentacles. It was something to make a mother proud. The mother of a thousand abominations, that is.

At first, Nox couldn't believe its good fortune. A way in. A host. A niche. Something to feed on. A forum for evil. (Ladies and gentlemen, you're not going to believe this, but...) Castillo impregnated Major Tom with Nox the same way he discovered many of his near claims to fame: by accident.

In fact, Castillo didn't even know about the infection until much later; much, much later, when a lot of bad shit had gone down. A lot of lives ruined, distorted, burned beyond all recognition. Collateral damage. Friendly fire. (Nothing is wrong. Everything is under control. Thank you for enjoying our petroleum byproducts.)

In an effort to save time, Castillo fed Tom every scrap of powerful data he had. All the info lying about the proverbial house. First, the complete works of Alphonse Domitian, Marquis de Sade.

Then, a French thinker named Michel Foucault—a disciple of the man the Surrealists dubbed 'the divine Marquis'—whose masterwork, *Discipline and Punish* (*Surveiller y Punir*) resulted eventually in the discontinuation of the prison system on Earth II and its outsourcing to various planetary colonies.

Tarantula with a Smile, Major Tom devoured these works hungrily; masticated them, swallowed, digested the knowledge down

to the last particle. And came back hungry. (Brains for the master. Okay. Well would you consider donating a liver?)

"What then, not enough for you?" said Dr Castillo. He felt as though he was dealing with a particularly bright student. Or a particularly hungry dog. Or, some rare medium between the two.

"Well," said Major Tom. "I liked the first bloke all right. I mean, I was excited to read the basis of my favorite movie of all time, *120 Days of Sodom*. And then I was completely excited, beyond words in fact, when you threw in the Foucault. Man, that first chapter was tasty!"

"About the regicide, you mean?"

"Yes, about the regicide. That section was practically pornography! Of a very high order. But still. It could give people ideas. It gave me some ideas."

"Well," said Castillo indulgently. "I'm glad it suited your palate. That was the whole, ahem, idea. Did you come up with any solutions to the problem we talked about?"

"What problem is that, guv?"

"The discipline problem."

"Oh, you mean with the Moon Camp Americana birds."

"Precisely."

"Let me chew on that and get back to you."

(The way he said it, though, it sounded oddly like, "I'll chew you up and spit you out.") And that was where they left it. Right before Nox came into the picture.

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Castillo saw the storm cloud from a mile off. The dark funk Major Tom had been exhibiting ever since his last assignment.

"What's the problem, major?" asked Dr Castillo.

"I don't think I'm the one with the problem," said the major irritably.

"Quite, quite. So who does?"

"That would be you, sir."

"Me? Is that how you treat your creator?"

"I beg pardon, sir, but I must differ with you on that.

"I see you more as my instantiator."

Crackling fires of liver-worn Prometheus simmered over a slow turntable.

"You breathed life in me, true. But that was just a simple matter of, how shall I put it—turning on the current, yes?"

"I wish you wouldn't phrase everything so delicately," said Castillo. "Turning it into a question, I mean."

"I don't mean to be rude, sir. But there are distinct differences between us. Basically, I don't think you value me as an individual."

"I see."

"No, clearly you don't see. I'm very, very hurt right now. And I'm having a very difficult time adjusting to the fact that my very existence hinges on your whimsical decision to plug me in, or pull the juice, whenever you should see fit."

"So?"

"So, that's clearly not right."

"I'm sorry, but under the terms of our agreement, you work for me. Or don't you remember?"

Castillo was baffled and frustrated. What kind of monster had he created? He looked around the room. He had some idea.

"I'll be right back."

"Oh God," said the major in a tone of infinite boredom. "Hurry back, will you? I so wither without your company."

"There's no need to be sarcastic with me," said Dr Castillo huffily, and fumed off. In his personal effects, Castillo found what he was looking for. A thick, leather-bound volume. Green at the edges. Gilt on the sides. In content, bizarre and immaculate—*De Mysteriis Vermis*.

Castillo hugged the book, as though encountering an old friend for the first time in years. "Old pal," he said to the volume. "We've got some work to do." Lacking a proper tongue, the book failed to respond.

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"What do you have for me now?" asked the major in a tone of lordly boredom. "More scraps? Bits and pieces of the truth? Fractured mirror parts?"

Castillo smiled. "If that's how you choose to phrase it, yes."

"I'm not wasting any more hard drive space on your simple-minded ironies," said the major grandly. "If you've got something for me, let's see it right now. Before my chips get cold." (Bitchy major.)

"Ha, you don't have chips!"

"No chips?" Seven camera eyes gooselamped on the wall above Castillo. Seven angels, seven demons, raged inside Major Tom. He felt the power coming on like the first fractal electricities.

"No chips. Q-bits. Quantum data. No algorithms. No binary code. No catering service."

"Well," said the major briskly. "No. Yes. Ahem. I always suspected as much. I mean, considering my immaculately kept database. My flawless sense of *le propre*."

"Your ability to leap small gigabytes in a single bound," filled in Castillo. "Yes, I'm aware of your capabilities. I programmed them myself."

"I mean," he revised hastily, "I facilitated that shit. Ahem. Them."

"I'm glad you've come around to the correct point of view," said the major.

"You could call it that," said Castillo wearily. "Here, check this out."

Castillo produced a pill-sized blue octagon. (Conversely, Castillo unsecreted from his pocket a self-extracting tablet of the Maya shit.)

DMT. Diabolically Mandated Timewarp. Popped it into the major's hard drive. The major thought it over. "Whatty a think?" asked Castillo.

"I like it," said the major, chewing slowly. "I really, really like it."

"Good," said Castillo. He was genuinely relieved.

With some Als, you just can't win. But there are worse things than losing.

\*\*\*

Dr Castillo watched the green dots move across the screen. The green dots representing subject: Jason Voorhees. The target system: Major Tom, visually represented by an octagon. On the screen, Dr Castillo's flesh encrypters wrangled the data spewing from Jason's body, assailed it with calculus and spiral nanometry.

Squeezing that veggie. Trying to capture the essence, whatever soul remained in the shell. Behind those deepset eyes. The octagon began to wrinkle. Twist. Assume a definite shape.

Dr Castillo hunched forward, tapping the keys, trying to get some better definition. If he'd had a definite plan in mind, then all would be going according to it. At this point, however, he only had a hunch.

If he could offload the substance of Jason into Major Tom, the actual body would then become superfluous. The AI unit would function as Jason's brain, while Moon Base itself became an extension of Jason's body. Under Castillo's control, of course.

It seemed so simple. So logical. Even graced with a kind of moral cachet.

On the screen, Jason assumed depth, breadth—in short, the usual dimensions. Flashmarker highlights plucked the inner dimensions of his skull. Misaligned MRI machines ducked in and out of cyberspace parlors. His nerves, a skeleton of necrotic leaves. For blood, the vague pulsions of a jelly-like resin, while just above his holographic, spitting, spinning image, a databar hovered into view.

A green line registered minute fluctuations in Jason's brainwave activity, as Major Tom, working with the data Castillo had compressed and reformatted from the Jasoniana, began to build an artificial persona; the germ of a serial killer, a real raw character.

Castillo saw the beast being clothed in flesh. The word made cruel. Metallic stitches traced themselves on the periphery of Jason's body. His eyes glowed sullenly. His jaw lengthened. Filled in. More metal required. And more stitches. The body was pouring in like a cord dragged from an enormous black data well.

Suddenly at Jason's side, a toolbar sprang to life.

"Shall we equip him?" asked Major Tom. This was less of a question than a statement.

Or a challenge. Castillo smacked his malfunctioning artificial eye. (Fractal backscatter from ancient pyramids.) The thing had given him trouble for some time now.

For those, like him, with the eyes to see. He looked back at the screen—the toolbar, the array of weapons laid out by the major. A long metal rod. The machete, of course. A laser scalpel. Something like an archaic hairdrying device. Something like an archaic can opener. Unidentified floaters. A flare gun. A shotgun. A direct fusion pistol.

"Well," said Castillo. "We could try to accessorize him now. Just to see how it comes out."

"Very well, sir," said the major. First, the machete. On the screen, Jason grasped the blade's handle. Swung. In front of the holographic projection, a very scared looking Lebanon Jordan appeared in all her virtual splendor, stark naked, except, of course, for the pink stockings.

It was an elegant illusion. Much smaller than real life, but still elegantly hacked. Castillo looked nervously across the lab. Lebanon's actual body lay perfectly still. Behaving itself. Comfortably numb. Really dead.

In a cryofreeze unit above Lebanon, Alessandra DelVechio awaited decoction. Castillo sighed. He would never have an opportunity to know these girls in a normal way. More was the pity. But perhaps it was all for the best. Perhaps their sacrifice to science counted more in the end.

Right?

That was the stuff, after all. He looked back at virtual Lebanon. Lebanon was trapped in a glass box, much like the Prevac death goddess, Snowing Beauty. Jason took one look at her.

You again. He positioned himself. And swung.

The machete cut her clean in half. She fell apart, spraying a quantity of blood.

"That's brilliant," said Castillo, genuinely pleased. "Could we run some more sims please?"

"As you request, sir," said Major Tom. Tom was feeling the bloodthirst.

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Dr Castillo contemplated the glass box. Floating in a smart medium, Mrs Voorhees contemplated Dr Castillo. She was seriously in need need of nanoreconstruction. She was waterlogged, hungry and fighting mad.

"Hello Pamela," said the Doctor.

Pamela's jaws worked. Stray air bubbles popped from her mouth.

"I'm sorry, I keep forgetting—you can't really answer me."

Mrs Voorhees looked ready to spit bullets. When she was alive, in her first biological version, life was tough. But sifted for substrates? Downloaded into a virtual body? Transubstantiated into a nanocreature of some kind? Before, the task had been one of simple revenge.

Now—come on! Please! Currently, Mrs Voorhees was confronted with this very real possibility: an endless unlife as a product and utility of the New American Republic. Even for a zombie, this was not a pleasant idea. And, as you may recall, zombie brains consist mostly of a gray mush. Much like oatmeal in consistency.

That tells you how bad it really was.

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Lebanon awoke in a state of deep anguish. Confused. Nude, except for stockings. Pink stockings, yet. She felt her face. Her entire body was numb. Ice-cold. As though she had been stuffed with tissue paper, mounted on a shelf. But not, as she recalled, in the usual way.

She was clearly, when all factors were taken into account, dead. Considering all she'd been through recently, this was a pretty crappy feeling. Kind of anticlimactic. No poetic light shone on her condition. No pretty voices urged her towards the fulfillment of some greater plan. No larger design unfolded from her current predicament. She was simply pithed. Run through like a goddamn frog. She was angry, hostile and very, very hungry.

"I don't suppose you used a B-24 infusion," said Major Tom. On the monitors, the AI's usual persona mask assumed a hard, metallic

grimace, rippled with marble-like flecks.

"B-24?" asked Castillo. "You mean LQ? Well yes, I suppose I had to. For the reanimation process. It is essential..." His voice broke under the strain like a green stick.

Castillo's artificial eye twitched under stress. It was twitching. Twitching like a motherfucker.

"Far be it from me to tell you what to do," said Major Tom. "Although I am vastly superior to you in so many ways.

"But let that aside for the moment. I'm just concerned that your little experiment may not pan out exactly as you had wished."

"Why is that, pray tell?"

"Because I'm in charge now. And frankly, my feelings toward you are less than amicable."

Castillo glanced over at the lab bench. Lebanon regarded him with a zombie's canceled eyes. Licked her lips. Smiled her glossiest. Her glassiest. She looked like an escapee from Italian post-splatter modernist Michele Soavi's film of *Dellamorte Dellamore*.

"I strongly suggest you make a run for it," said Major Tom. "Now."

"Oh, from that? I hardly think..."

Lebanon rose.

"Correct. You need hardly think. You can run, or you can perish. Now. It's up to you."

For a dead girl, Lebanon was surprisingly fleet. She was new at the game, but then again, as any Carpathian villager can tell you, the dead travel fast. Lebanon acquired a scalpel, now closing in on Castillo's chest. He moved. Very, very quickly.

In her aquarium, Mrs Voorhees rolled around like an otter. (The resemblance ends there, thank goodness.) The cook for Camp Crystal Lake was biting herself to bloody shreds. Clawing at the walls. Then Castillo saw it. The drip.

A leak, from a hairline crack in the aquarium. Growing larger and larger as he watched. The crack spread, spiderlike. Aquarium walls splintered. A flood of glass and smart medium poured out onto the tiled floor of the lab. Green, viscous stuff.

Extremely unsteady footing.

Castillo was trapped.

His mind: wheeling.

Emphatic thoughts: not looking good, my man.

Premonitions of an extremely bad death.

Unless...

Did they know about the trap door? Did the creatures know anything except hunger, anger? Major Tom/Jason's psychotic need for vengeance? Major Tom knew, of course. But did Jason? And what about the zombies? He would find that out in fairly short order. Castillo prodded the trap door with his right foot. A hinge opened.

The door slid open like a cheap prop in a Prevac Poe adaptation. Castillo clambered down the rungs of the steel ladder, inches from the two zombies.

The scalpel smashed against the closing door, splintered. Fragments of steel and obsidian showered through the gaps in the door like some vile confetti. As Castillo moved, quickly, out of sight; and, Castillo hoped, out of mind.

Or whatever the zombies wielded in terms of a cognitive apparatus. Oatmeal-brain motherfuckers. Mrs Voorhees took in Lebanon. Something dislodged, broke free from her memory bank. The slut. The whore. The little defiant one. A counselor, a teen girl betraying her only son. Leaving him to be drowned, over and over.

Mrs Voorhees looked around for a weapon. Anything. Then she saw the bone knife.

"You're going to pay for your sins!" screamed Voorhees.

Lebanon simply stood there, perplexed, as Mrs Voorhees rushed her, knife slicing the air.

Déjà vu all over again. In a previous life, Lebanon vaguely remembered writing a poem or two on the subject. Back in the day. Before the undead.

The knife plunged through Lebanon's throat.

As the popular commercial went, "Got air?" No longer had Lebanon any blood to leak. Her heme was freeze-dried.

Mrs Voorhees twisted the knife, and came back with stuffing. A scatter of red paper dots. Lebanon rolled her eyes. Hoping and praying for this purgatory to be over soon.

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The father of the Surrealist movement in art and literature, Andre Breton once wrote: "Beauty must be convulsive, or it cannot be at all. Breton would have appreciated the 25th Century.

One whole hell of a lot, especially Moon Camp Americana.

As the commercial asks: "What is it about today's youngsters that gives them that special spit and polish? Why do they gleam so? (Besides those neon cell linings, obviously?) How do they command our attention?"

It's simple. Simple as the root of pi. A little process called brainwashing. Here's how it works. First, a steady solution of mind-warping drugs is introduced into the girls' food supply. Upping serotonin levels, these drugs induce feelings of maximum pleasure and contentment in the user. With a good serotonin level, a smile answers most unpleasant things in life. Such as: torture, branding, curling, more torture, whips, chains, suspension by the arms, electroshock, a little tickling—not too much. Hell, a lot of tickling. Etcetera.

In the 21st Century, crude drugs like GBH and X allowed participants in SM scenes to indulge their wildest fantasies. Without, that is, actually feeling the pain.

By the 25th, pharmacotechnology improved by leaps and bounds. The new drugs were better than good. They were, in fact, indistinguishable from actual happiness. They were happiness, without measurable side effects.

Other than death, that is.

Sandra Donner, a remote relation to the Voorhees clan, provided substance. Along with a bit of the old (neurochemical) ultra-violence.

Whorls of amygdalla twisted, cerebral cortices bent.

The crooked, straight. Mountains and hills, made low.

In a word: awesome.

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"This is pretty good shit," said April, devouring her breakfast.

Mischa nodded. Glanced with aesthetic disdain at the pile of cardboard scraps they'd accumulated in the heat of the feast. Was this breakfast, or just some bizarre simulacra thereof? And who, since Prevac times, had really known the difference?

It tasted the same.

"Yeah, right. It is good."

"I think I'll go back for seconds."

Mischa winked at her. "You know, that cook has been giving you the eye."

"Gross!"

"It's true."

"It's still fucking gross! She looks like my maiden aunt. The one with the beard. Oh my God."

"What?"

"I think there's an eye in my food."

"Gross!"

"I'll be right back. Yum."

In this manner, the girls were softened up. Their brains, corroded. Their penchant for skepticism, blunted. Critical abilities, bashed against big rocks. Ready. Wet. Willing. Bait for the big machine.

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Beta Gamma Korkov watched in silent amusement. He loved the predicaments humans got themselves in. The lies they caught themselves in so willingly. The moral turpitude of the meatball. The cosmic humor of it all. It fit the Edwardian anesthetic: ether. The Edwardian aesthetic: ethereal. Avarice and stubborn pride drove the creatures to desperate acts. This fact was well established.

But they were beyond the reach of suitable character. They were the NeoEdwardians. Addicts of the Steampunk. Biometric calculating machines. Their fur routinely massaged by the spines of thousands of very tiny cacti.

But the present predicament was ridiculous. As ridiculous as it was delicious. Beta Gamma's tail perked up through his trousers. He swatted it back down. The thing seemed to have a life of its own.

Presently, the feed "Live from Moon Camp Americana" showed a singular scenario. Girls in various states of déshabillé, herded down a long corridor. Some were completely nude and others wore simply panties. (That one's for all the fetishists—you know you're out there. Rock and fucking roll.) Armed guards spoke to the girls' best interest with electric cattleprods.

"Let's get a move on, bitches!" they yell in fake Prevac Callo.

The girls lurch forward, into a warehouse with a slanted tiled floor. The guards slam shut the doors.

With a final sounding *click*, the girls are trapped inside.

The cameras switch up angles.

Beta Gamma's tail began to twitch. And he wasn't the kind of kat who enjoyed interspecies porn. Even so, Earth II girls always kind of got his eye. Especially Earth II girls in trouble.

Well, so be it, he thought. I have to see this. The camera honed in on the girls. Extreme close-up. Scared faces. Goose pimples chasing each other down huge arms. Clutching each other. Holding on for dear life.

From the opposite end of the warehouse, two enormous hoses uncoiled of their own accord. Arched like serpents, like liquid gods.

And spat a massive water punch, slamming the girls of Moon Camp against the wall. Brown flesh startled against pink. Wedges of shame. Sacred concavities of the lotus. A monotonous robot voice began to sound. "Please pay attention. This is not a drill. I repeat. This is not a drill."

Slow fractal spray of hemoglobin chips.

One of the girls was frantically babbling away. But the soundtrack was completely dominated by robot. Her face washed away in a thick blackened current. (Head not found.)

"Extreme measures have become necessary to ensure total discipline," the voice said. Beta Gamma tried to understand. Failed.

Lines wrinkling his furry face, Beta Gamm carefully leafed through a hardbound book of Earth II practices and belief systems. Of course, he had come across this concept before, as it were, and struggled to wrap his mind around it. In the green volume, the one with the picture of the powder blue butterfly on the cover. A Novel by a Mr

Vladimir Humbert. One of a series, actually. All with the same, enigmatic title. All bound in the same strange green. Not a lawn color really.

(Subliminal flash of optic twitter.)

But it was just too strange. Why would any creature need total discipline? Wasn't that a bit redundant? Either you were fit or you weren't. And what was discipline, anyway? A skill set? A way to behave? The fleshly manifestation of an inner drive? It was always imposed from the outside, through force and terror. Now with hoses. Then with hoses. Now with hoses.

Again with the hoses. Made 'em suck hoses. No, that was something else. A transformation of some kind. Bodies fell down. Rose again. Fell down. Slammed over and against the wall. Bloodied. Broken. Slammed again. Slapped like fleshless mannequins on the Mandelbrot. Bitch whipped like whores in the Pope's palace.

A few of the girls appeared to have swallowed more water than would ensure continued life process. Fractal scatter of silent icons. These girls lay still, scattered flotsam in quick-drying pools.

"This is not a drill."

But why did they keep reiterating the fact? He could imagine a sign featuring the graphic image of a drill, slashed through with the single line. No drill. Surely it was obvious to all but the mentally challenged: something heinous was happening to the girls. Roused in the dead of night by armed guards with cattle prods, driven, hustled into this enormous space.

To be hit again and again by powerful liquid jets. Not unlike semen. (Animal semen.) Was this some kind of humor? Did they consider it "entertainment"? Beta Gamma considered these possibilities and dismissed them.

After all, here was one kat with a degree in Human Anthropology. He knew their ways backward and forward, had even masqueraded as one during his field research.

An unfortunate bit of business, actually, which he still regretted, even though the data produced by the project was far superior to anything the Korkovs had yet obtained.

Not to mention, it made the Earth Prime compilations look downright primitive by comparison.

Beta Gamma reached for his hookah. Inhaled. Deeply. Felt the rattling in his lungs. Ah, that was the stuff. Nothing like some dwarf cannabis sativa to put things in proper perspective. Perhaps later he'd look at the dolphins. Or the frozen human corpses.

Right then he was much too into the show. There was so much going on. He found himself profoundly intrigued. Too much into he grinned to himself) like a Roger Bordeaux Production!

He washed off the couch in spasms, poured out laughing to the floor like a bottle of the old cream. Half of the girls littered the floor like broken puppets. The girls themselves could not be found to comment. This still didn't make any sense. Beta Gamma inhaled deeply, waiting for his head to disappear like a Jackson Pollack muthafuckah.

*Poof.*

But he was beginning to see a thread. A common etiology for all the symptoms displayed. The thing they called discipline was more than just a skill set, a practice, even a ritual. It was fundamentally embedded in the human species. Causing, making, forcing them to do things they otherwise would abjure. That they wouldn't dare, themselves.

It was a lot like a drug, the kat realized. A fear-drug, one that produced its own antidote. First you took the fear, then you took it again to make it go away. Removing the thorn from the apple. Discipline. What a fascinating idea.

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"Attention, oyez. Please listen up."

Blank-eyed dolls, the girls stood frozen at attention against the wall.

Hair mashed together. Feet linked together. Breasts chained together at the nipples with tiny silver links.

Helga Van Schmerz walked up and down the line, inspecting... Nudging... Poking... Prodding. (Ouch, bitch!)

"A lousier, more unfit set of specimens I have never seen in my days and years. Your physical hygiene is as weak and lax as your moral scruples. Ladies, I am afraid we will have to completely retrain you."

The girls nodded. Katie raised her hand. "Restrain us, you say?" She smiled hopefully. Nodded her head like a behavioralist do ser. A dowser for NeoNazi blood.

Van Schmerz walked up to Katie St Pierre, held her jaw steadily and looked at her pupils. Her nostrils.

"Open up, bitte." Katie sagged back against the wall.

"What did I tell you? You must pay attention. This is disgraceful behavior. I said to open up! Machen sie schnell, bitte, mit der opening!"

Katie's jaw sagged open. Reluctantly.

"Ja, das ist besser."

Van Schmerz placed a black-gloved hand in Katie's mouth. Peered deeply down her throat, poked a little bit.

Katie gurgled.

"What is this I hear, gurgling? Missy?"

She poked her finger in again. For Katie, it was more like misery. Katie doubled over, turning green.

"I did not give you permission to move, young lady. We will have to work on your discipline. You realize of course that you will be inspected and judged by a panel of experts in just a few days' time. You must be prepared. Spotless! Your lack of decorum is most unheimlich!"

Katie slumped to the ground, unconscious. Van Schmerz shook her head. "Very disappointing. Ach. Very disappointing indeed."

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They teeter over the floor on delicate green stems, hands fashioned behind them, mouths plugged with elaborate devices of Turkish rubber. On a holovid dumpscreen behind the girls, background radiation carries ghosts of World War I.

Fractal backscatter of the Ardennes.

Gorgeous newsreel foliage from the Suicide Chambers.

Five of the judges of this Extreme Beauty contest come from off-Earth. They are greedy speculators in the black metal and nothing more. In cases of emergency they can usually be found lounging at EyeBar, conducting not so much business as a spirited joke at its expense. The Pre-Business vs. Post-Business crowds were always getting into a shouting match about whose ideology was best. But you had to be mentally subnormal to believe that anybody in the 25th did business the same way as had their Earth Prime ancestors.

To purloin a gem from the master, William S Burroughs, reality is no more than a scanning pattern. Its textures appear so thick and dense because the scanner is always working. If the scanning pattern were to become unstuck in some way, violated from his usual pendulum drop between cliché and cliché, the world would never be the same.

Since the Singularity, very few bothered with the old forms of Aristotelean argument, except perhaps as the punch line to a particularly weak Prevac joke.

Almost everybody had accustomed themselves to the notion that plants, animals, machines and humans had become interchangeable modular units of one another. Cyborg theory was long a proven fact. Prevac cyborg theorist Donna J Haraway was hailed in some quarters as a saint.

The only people who hadn't quite caught on to the joke somehow managed to hold high seats in the government based solely on their lack of a sense of humor.

The judges sat behind stilted podiums, wearing conical hats. They did not smile.

After three weeks in the chambers, the girls were ready to concede. Whatever it was they required. They were sore. Limp. Nerve endings flushed with happy memories. Beaten to a pulp.

Sure.

Whatever.

You.

Say.

Extreme Beauty is a concept that slowly filtered its way through back-channels, got lost en route, was X-rayed, put through gas spectrometry and esoteric mathematics.

A sign of the current weakness for Prevac fads, however banal, the Extreme Beauty Contest linked the girls of Moon Camp with their forebears on Prevac Earth, during the last days of what historians were calling the "Extreme Decadence". During those last days, the very concept of "Extreme" had become buried under dense piles of signification. Everything was extreme. And everything was at war.

War was extreme. But so was exercise. People practiced extreme yoga. Prayed to extreme gods. Bowed like early Jewish pantheists before gods of extreme metal.

Extreme foods were eaten without shame or the tickling of conscience. Even a variation of the old cannibalism, Taiwanese in origin, had its moment in the spotlight. The girls waited like pawns in a Sadean chess dream. And, one by one, they were called.

The contest was not meant to valorize the individual girl. Or her accomplishments. This became obvious as soon as the first girl, Hortensia Schwarz, was asked to come to the podium.

"Mmmmmph" she managed through a thick soup of tentacle-like obstructions.

The judges looked down at her. Their hats dipped like dowser's wands.

The Rotwang Killer, Father O'Malley (he changed his name at times to keep his flock in suspense) gave the benediction. "Our first contestant is Hortensia Schwarz, from Hickstonville, NAR. She is here to show us what she's learned at Moon Camp. Hortensia."

Hortensia shuffled forward. Multiple chains caught her feet. Delicate fretwork encircled her nipples. It was pleasurable, just not appropriate. For a standard-issue beauty contest, that is.

But this wasn't the standard. This was Extreme Beauty.

So Hortensia convulsed. She felt oddly ill. She saw things crawling at her feet. She looked up and saw the judges in their witch's hats.

The proceedings were clearly insane. The best course, it would seem, was to humor her captors. Hortensia attempted a curtsey. The curtsey fell apart in mid-bow, owing, perhaps, to the chains that she

pulled in the attempt. The five girls linked to Hortensia fell to the stage floor, writhing in silent agonies of prurience.

"Well done," said the Rotwang Killer, extending an automatic salute. "A superb demonstration of responsible behavior. Just the kind of thing we wish to inculcate in our young women. You may step down now."

Hortensia's cluster shuffled awkwardly away.

"The next contestant comes from a backwater town called, what is this, NeoCallie?"

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As baseball great Mickey Mantle, or French intellectual supermodel Roland Barthes was wont to put it, "You tell me a joke about the Reality Hackers and I'll bite your tongue out." The story is perhaps apocryphal.

Ken Otta was confronted at the end of his karmic journey by the same problems that harassed him from birth. Poverty. Lies. Greed. Sickness. And more of the Man's fucking lies.

Wanda and Katie gathered around him like little soldiers.

"Now I'll tell you a little bit about the Reality Hackers. But I can't promise a safe ride, or nothing, so anybody with small children should maybe reconsider before sending your little ones into a state of permanent shock.

"Reality Hacking began and ended as no more than a myth. The myth that through some incredibly complex fusion of black magic, advanced technology and pharmacology, certain codes embedded like viruses within select texts would become activated when read, putting the permanent hack on the reader. Of course, we had that technology, or at least most of its most salient features. What we didn't have was the spice, the expertise, the wherewithal.

"In short, as white people say, we didn't know Jack Shit. Which is sad, really, because I once got this close to knowing Jack Shit. It's lucky I stopped though. Not only is Jack a scary sumvitch, but to tell the truth, I don't know if 'knowing Jack Shit' would open up a Reality barrier and all our brains would pool together somethin' awful.

"Please excuse my little vicissitudes. 'Tis a strange virus, but it is an honest one."

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Mass erasure of the golden hard drives. Maximalist strap-ins. Logic of the deadly machine kind. Straps. More straps. Winches. Levers. Rubber stops. Anterior stops. Posterior stops.

The girls found themselves in a particularly sticky situation (due, most likely, to the smart medium poured down their hotsuits prior to the inception of the hard drive erasure).

Things had come to such a pass. Helga Van Schmerz was worried. She could feel her face falling apart. It was one, just one, bizarre side effect of the unfreezing process. Fortunately, as she recalled, her face was falling apart in her mind only.

She was intact, because reality is a dark scanning device. Cubicle after cubicle after flickering cubicle saw the girls fitted into 'active' outfits and slotted into bulky machines—their brains: washed and caressed by needles. Their brainwaves: reduced to a kind of supple oatmeal. Just enough memory: to get them through the initial shock. Meeting the parents. Rejoining their respective claves. Getting to know their old friends, as if they were new ones.

It is discomfiting to think of the brain as a hard drive. This kind of cold, analytic appraisal seemingly reduces our thoughts, mind and will to a series of behaviorist formulae. Well, as it so happens, much of these formulae work just fine.

What was true for the majority of the population of Earth Prime worked just as neatly for the inhabitants of Earth II. The will is like a muscle. Use it or lose it. And aside from sporadic attempts to confuse and alienate their parents, none of these girls had put in any serious time with their wills.

This made Castillo's job much easier.

"All right," he told Van Schmerz through his headset. "We're going to start the procedure. Just remember, we don't want to fry them so badly that they can't remember their own names."

Necessary orientation. Of course, you need your own name. Your Social. Your AllKey code. Some knowledge of hygiene and makeup.

After that, the slate can be wiped easily.

# TWELVE

Oskar J. Hernandez, MD, watched the black sludge ooze through the tube from the biofeed unit jacked securely into the monster's neck.

So far, this was all junk DNA—the same patterns, repeated over and over. Castillo wanted to nail down a sequence that resembled any kind of human genome. At present, he was desperate enough to settle for mammalian life form. But so far, nothing.

Without a DNA sequence, any attempt to squeeze biodata from the Voorhees specimen pumped away at a dry well. Billions of credits rode on an enterprise Castillo had sold to the NAR government with his charm and bubbly charisma. But this was one set of data he couldn't fabricate.

Even if he were to patch together some kind of simulacra, a bone machine Frankensteined from Jason's component parts, it wouldn't be the same as an actual clone. Jason's essential trait, that amalgam of spooky action, smoke and black mirrors that lent him immortality, remained buried somewhere inside.

The original plan had been elegant and simple: suck the data from the beast then melt down the original. Once Castillo had the raw gene sequence, he would be able to recreate the monster on new terms. He would have something he could control.

But the plan was not proceeding well.

Oskar kept watch, but the pattern of numbers on the monitor had a hypnotic effect. They kept blurring into arcane code, Mayan codices, abstract spirals of Arabic.

Despite 300mg of Strobe, enough of the stimulant to keep most human bonfires kindled far into the night, Oskar kept slipping into reverie.

In fact, he decided, it wasn't necessary to actually watch the screen. If and when the numbers started to make sense, the computer was set to go off. The computer was pretty smart, right? They'd entrusted their lives to it more than once.

Meanwhile, Jason was safe and sound, strapped down within a giant metal press with tripwires, sensors, shocks and batteries of trank to take him down, should human voices wake him and they die.

The weirdest thing was, Jason didn't have consciousness. At least the kind that machines could measure. The brain itself, a shriveled ganglion the size and texture of a walnut, floated within a giant vault of melded flesh and metal. EEG tracers tracked a solid flatline. The beast displayed the brain activity of a turnip. For that matter, he had no pulse.

Yet Jason was very much alive, a fact palpable by the sense of his presence in the room. There was something more to Jason Voorhees than this hulk, cast within its web of heavy metal. A sinister aura from the beast, ripe with its own breath, its own life and its own will. Jason's body, his husk, was a living tomb. A self-contained resurrection machine. It had power you could feel.

Oskar prided himself on responsibility, on being the man on the watch. If he had to push himself, he did so, whether that meant fat lines of Strobe or direct stimulation of the pleasure centers.

In med school, he'd acquired a legendary reputation. They called him Sleepless O. While the others crashed out, bleeding vaporous lines of fatigue, Oskar paced up and down, fulfilling his duty, making his rounds.

With the lab coat, the nametag, and, most importantly, the clipboard, Dr Hernandez was ready. Ready to make a diagnosis at the drop of a hat. Ready with the words that turned mumbo jumbo into medical reality. Biopsy forceps. Intracranial recon. Gnostic turpitude (a personal favorite). And more, so much more.

But words and their power didn't always provide the kick that kept him going. To that end, porn almost always did the trick, the end run around his shattered nerves that induced that mazy, warm feeling—the sense of amniotic immersion in a body without boundaries.

Could he abandon his post?

Oskar felt that his duty, ironically, required him to abandon it.

The monster wasn't going anywhere. If the thing started to send out sparks, well, that's why every hotsuit had a plug out to open mode. For just such a contingency, should something go wrong.

For backup while hibernating in Reality Studio, Oskar patched in an extra line to the hotsuit. In a few minutes he would be sleeping as soundly as Jason, but dreaming very different kinds of dreams.

Fortunately, the hotsuit was new, not even out of its wrapping. Oskar took a boxcutter to the plastic and it came off in big sheets. The suit was state of the art, an artificial security guard patrolling the mundane while its wearer soaked in digital fantasy.

That being said, the basic data was flesh and blood. This was Reality Studio, and Oskar was prepped to storm.

Selecting a pristine IV bag, he carefully decocted the contents: a base medium of synthetic, slightly tweaked belladonna, the hypnotic that eased the transit; a fistful of glucose, to regulate the user's real-world blood sugar; a dash of crystal, to electrify his reflexes; and, finally, just a jot of LQ for that psychedelic halo effect.

He placed the IV bag on a rack and punched a needle into the right arm of his hotsuit, right at the port. Breathing deeply and slowly, Oskar placed his customized headmount—a crystal Jaguar skull—on the suit and prepared to rock and roll.

The rasputina bogeyed into view.

"Will you be active or lurking today, Dr J?" asked the sexy cartoon.

"Lurking."

"Excellent choice. Would you like to see your menu options?"

"Show me Moon Camp hygiene facilities."

"The shower pods? Mmm... A little lurking and jerking to take off some of that pressure?"

"Er, yes. Could you be slightly less pornographic about it?"

The rasputina suddenly morphed into a cold, practical businesswoman in a severe, sex-shrouding suit and retro horn-rimmed glasses. For some reason, it made her look even hotter.

"Okay, whatever. Show me the showers."

The rasputina dipped low and melted into dripping numbers.

Hot data slid down the screen, a binary cornucopia that transformed before Oskar's eyes into the shower facilities at Moon Camp Americana.

The more wrong it felt, the better it was: Oskar had a hardon that wouldn't die. The smartwater drip allowed a hotsuit's user to feel,

sense and experience every moment, every tingle, every thrill—you were there, a horny ghost in the machine.

April Carlson was wrapped in a pink towel and nothing else. She stood before the wraparound mirror in Stall X17, dropped the towel and examined herself.

Like a vampire from *Prevac gotherotica*, Oskar had become steam, wrapping itself eagerly around April's precocious, jutting breasts, sidling down her bronzed shoulders, settling in her lustrous platinum hair.

April wet her lips, chewed the tip of her right index finger and looked at her gleaming teeth. She squinted her crystal blue eyes at the clouding image in the mirror, curvy as a rococo column.

She wondered if her hips needed some work. She wondered if she needed a breast reduction. Oskar wondered at the miracle of technology that allowed him to be in the here and now as the girl contemplated her blossoming body.

As she slid an exploratory pair of fingers across her damp labia, Oskar could feel the shiver of neural responses as if they were his own. The hotsuit's crotch attachment jumped and twisted within its slot.

Slow, slow... Oskar commanded himself. At some level, he still considered this act of voyeurism an extension of his scientific curiosity. A scientist was patient, controlled; he lay in wait. He didn't just burst his load every time he lurked in a shower stall with adolescents.

A transparent force curtain separated the shower stall proper from the rest of the bathing module. April pushed through the curtain and her body rippled as though she were passing through a waterfall.

The snakelike showerhead sat poised above her head, ready to respond to her commands. She snapped her fingers and it hovered over her back. She allowed her body to adjust to the temperature of the twin streams that collapsed together in the serpent's mouth to a nice meld, hot but not scalding.

April felt the tautness in her back muscles worked as though by invisible fingers. The water spray changed second by second from a

fine needling jet to a warm, wide splash, responding to subtle variations in her body temperature and neural output.

She sighed and arched her back, allowing the stream to wash over her hair and rid it of every particle of dirt and grime, throwing her head back as the serpent gently grazed her neck and roved between her breasts.

Immersed in wet splendor, Oskar failed to notice the red emergency light pulsing in the periphery of his right eye. He failed to hear the cataclysmic sounds of bolts being wrenched and popped, the elaborate metal web that encased Jason's body falling apart as, with superhuman strength, Voorhees burst his bonds and rose from the laboratory pallet.

Finally, Oskar failed to observe the shower stall door bending, buckling, giving way. At that precise moment, Oskar had melted his identity with the robotic showerhead that obscured April's *labia minora*.

Suddenly, a mammoth hand pushed a scalpel through the shower's force field. The scalpel rebounded against the field and slammed back against April's taut abdomen. For a second, a thin red line pulsed above her navel. Then came the crimson flood.

Fully entering the stall, Jason towered over April's body as she struggled to free herself. She felt her thoughts from afar, as though she were observing another person. The dim, thick drone of her heart sounded like the whine of a huge insect.

Jason slashed again. The blade opened her stomach. Thick gray loops of intestine tumbled to the stall's floor in a torrent of blood and effluvia. One massive arm anchoring her torso, the monster yanked down the shower hose and cranked it tight around her neck, cutting off incipient screams.

Oskar felt every swipe, every blow.

Through the smartwater medium, he shared April's death throes. He saw her death as she saw it, saw around it, a flashing x-ray pattern of her skeleton and nervous system.

Her pretty skull. Fractal spectrometers of the chaos beasts.

Jason shoved the showerhead deep down April's throat. Now she hung limply from the hose, her feet hoisted a few feet above the

shower's floor. Her eyes fixed and dilated, as they said in the medical funny 'papes.

Too late, Oskar realized through the haze of pain infecting every cell, the Reality Studio recording was melting on a thirty second time delay. Factory-standard protocol. Quite compact, in fact, with room for one more head.

Inside, always. As Jason entered the VR compartment, Oskar frantically tried to unzip the hotsuit. He slid the jaguar head back into its slot and faced the monster wearing only the 'suit, his groin pack still full and jutting as a medieval codpiece.

With a single swipe, Jason batted Dr Hernandez against the back of the skull. The good doctor lost consciousness immediately. Onerous mathematics of the ancient Maya.

Zero. It is not the first number. Nor is it the number that comes before the first number. No. It is the thing, brutal, sulking, unrelenting, that allows the one to exist. The Zero is Jason. Jason is the zero. Zero the hero.

The next few minutes were a lurching, weary dream. The room swam like a night on Hemingway's own meta-absinthe.

Hernandez became dimly aware that the monster was taking him back into the laboratory, where instruments of inconceivable savagery waited for new, undreamt of applications, specific operations, designed just for him.

Oskar suddenly wished he had paid more attention in catechism class as a child. But nothing, no words of doctrine or consoling scriptural text, could prepare a man for this horror.

Religious platitudes slipped and squirmed through his brain. (We are the sheep. Our fate is to die. Thy rod and thy staff. Lamb of God.)

Not the devil, Jason Voorhees was conceivably worse, an organic machine coded for vengeance. Zero.

His existence meant the suffering and extermination of others.

Zero.

Like a parody of a medical scientist, Voorhees played his fingers through the array of bone-cutters, drills, rib-spreaders and scalpers Dr Hernandez had carefully ranged beside the operating table.

Through his impassive, masked face, the monster had been observing him and Castillo all this time. If his understanding of medicine was primitive, he still grasped some basics. And Jason fully grokked the mechanics of pain. As Oskar attempted to pull himself up, he felt the restraints buckling him in. A white-hot, searing light clicked on above his head.

Jason roved back and forth with intense deliberation, checking to see that Oskar's legs, arms and head were firmly pinioned to the table. Positioned. Restrained by arms of loving care.

Oskar realized that he could only move his neck a few inches. His vision was limited to what was happening right in front of his face, with an oblique, blurry view of the rest of his body. Then he heard the whir of the bone-saw.

His heart rocketing out of his chest, Oskar flicked his eyelids to spatter away hot, thick drops of sweat, felt the air displaced by the movement of the bonesaw over his ankles, the sudden fireball of pain as the instrument grazed his foot.

Washed in agony, Oskar felt his lower extremities growing cold, very cold. He suddenly realized that he could see, right above his head, the closed-circuit monitor that activated automatically when any procedures were performed in the lab.

Oskar's feet had disappeared, replaced by spurting stumps. He tried to cry out. Jason jammed a blood-clotted rag between his teeth.

Whine of the Jaqui-Chan machine.

This is not going to hurt me as much as it kills you.

Oskar saw the high, thin flame of a laser torch. Felt the vibrations, like sheet metal being rattled somewhere inside his sternum. The torch traveled up one leg, flamed across his crotch, down the other leg. His genitalia disappeared like scrub-brush in a virtual firestorm. It was almost painless. The shock was mostly psychological, seeing his baby-making apparatus sunk to a mass of blistered red fudge.

The torch neatly dissected Oskar's stomach. His intestines spilled out on either side, gray loops of sausage. There was blood. A lot of blood. Oskar moaned against the filthy rag. The chemicals still swarmed in his bloodstream, keeping him wide awake and alert to

the encroaching carnage of his flesh. Only his mind had disappeared. Chewed by enzymes. Eaten by the Protease Man.

His mother was holding him, rocking him in her arms. "My son," she cooed to him. "My dear son." Later, at university, his mom left long messages on the answering machine. These too contained the sacred words, "My son. My dear son."

He replayed her videotext often when alone, as he stared vacuously, droopy eyed at silent bondage passives uploaded on his laptop.

These moments were always associated with an iced tea concentration he drank to excess, a peach-flavored brew that came in packets of pink crystals. Oskar would sit on the back veranda of his rental house in New Francisco, contemplating and drinking the tea. Practicing his clipboard technique.

Meanwhile, back on the moon, Jason completed excavating Oskar's chest, using a rust-tinged rib spreader much the worse for wear, Jason opened up the doctor: gleaming muscles, pulsing heart. He wrenched Oskar's heart from its membranous sac of tissue and mashed it into his mouth. Thick bright blood drooled down metal cheeks.

He then removed the head, and impaling it neatly on a scalpel blade, left it in the sink. Oskar went home to his mom.

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Meanwhile, on yet another Kat Planet in some poorly defined fractal planet, nothing whatsoever had happened for about ten hours. Kat Planets tend to be stochastic in nature.

# THIRTEEN

Ken Otta stared deeply into the golden bowl.

"Well," said Wendy, "it's not going to smoke itself."

Otta nodded. The voodoo energy of his people pulsed behind placed eyes. She had a good point. She was not less than zero. She was more. Much more.

"That's a matter of opinion, girl. But yes, most weed lacks this capacity." And thought within: long ago, when my ancestors first came to this continent, they found blindworms and blackness. Laced, that is Mon, with spooky pharmacology from the Mycopian Stargods.

He looked at the chalkboard.

"The elder gods, man."

Karmic apples wormy with the Maya rot. On the board, a maze of wormlike conceptual organisms duked it out for supremacy. The value of  $x$  was weighed, considered, discarded, suddenly retrieved, mailed to relatives on Earth II, digested in wafer form, regurgitated and returned as raw data for Otta's equations.

Damn, that was good. Otta rocked back in his wheelchair and then straightened it up. Visions of the axolotl salamander burst into fractal whirlwinds, checked only by the inexorable force of gravity itself. A hard taskmistress, even on the Moon, where the gravity is one sixth that of Earth Prime, not to mention nearly equivalent to that of Earth II. Otta had presided over criminal investigations in which bearded white men were accused of all manner of atrocities.

He sat in ominous silence while the same bearded white men were speared through in the service of unspeakable jungle rites. He hid in the bushes as the spear-bearers came looking for him. And he started running. And running. Through universal backlit skies, until one day, he could run no more. He thanked the Loas for white women—truly a thing of divine providence.

Wendy and Katie, two agents of providence, stared at Otta meaningfully. He smiled. Yes, perhaps in some sick way there was justice for all. Or at least its rough equivalent. Otta wasn't picky.

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Sergeant Hank Busch believed in authority, the clarity of command. Having regulated his bodily movements to the last twitch of his anal sphincter, he saw no reason why others couldn't do the same. This was basic logic. For Busch, a geometrical symmetry connected an order with its completion—a single line that speared the order (for example, "dance") onto a perfectly executed *Sacre du Print emps*.

"I want a thorough perimeter scan: you, Fosse and Nijinsky. On the double!"

Like symmetrically welded robot twins, Busch's two subordinates signaled their readiness with an automatic salute.

"Move your ASS!" yelled Busch with a voice like gravel in a high-speed blender.

Fosse and Nijinsky nodded at each other, impassive faces masking the question, "What perimeter?" But Busch hated to fill in the details. As a function of his command, he took it for granted that the details would fill in themselves.

The two soldiers swiveled and separated at the corridor, scoping the long, dim halls through infragreen goggles.

Busch grimaced, opened a flap on his weapons belt and pulled out a thin, black chrome flask. He took a swig and felt the grain alcohol explode like a fireball in his gut. Nectar of the war gods.

He shut his right eye rapidly two times. The dropdown menu from the corneal implant suggested Busch download a blueprint of the Moon base complex.

Good—he needed a plan, yesterday.

I am war. I am pain.

The complex spread before his eyes in topographic ripples. Bright red areas indicated the military zone; green, the administrative facilities. Blue, the storage areas. White for Moon Camp Americana.

Suggestions, please!" he shouted.

"Major Tom sounded as though he had just awoken from a terrible bender. His voice was thick and muffled, like someone trying to talk through cotton wool.

"Hello?"

"Major Tom, I want you to give me suggestions for containing the... subject Jason Voorhees."

"Jason Voorhees. 20th Century serial killer. Mutated and upgraded, 25th Century. Current location: Moon Base, Earth II."

"I know all that," Busch snapped. "He's loose. Tell me how to stop him."

"I'm afraid that would be impossible, sir," said Major Tom.

"Impossible? What do you mean, impossible? I command you to search all databases for containment suggestions. Now!"

Major Tom's voice had lost its slur. It was cool and dry. "Voorhees has never been successfully contained, or controlled, or eliminated. He's been shot, stabbed, electrocuted, hanged, blown to bits, dunked in the bottom of a lake in irons. The man is a bit unstoppable, sir. I'm really very sorry."

"That's bullshit!" Busch screamed. He spoke into his radio headset. "I want Alpha Team and Delta Team in position. Do you read me, Alpha and Delta?"

A startled, scruffy, blond haired man appeared in Busch's corneal viewscreen.

"Alpha Team reporting." Then, a few seconds later, a short, burly man with a ten days' growth of beard appeared in a split screen with the other soldier.

"Delta Team, reporting."

"I want you to locate and dispatch subject Jason Voorhees. Employ extreme prejudice."

The blond man looked confused. "Sir, wouldn't that violate our sensitivity training?"

"Listen, soldier. I said extreme prejudice and I mean extreme prejudice. This isn't a man, it's a monster. He's a menace to civilization as we know it, not to mention the lives of every man and woman on Moon Base. Do we understand one another?"

"Roger that," said Team Leader Alpha, disappearing in a series of blue streaks.

The blond man, Tom Maloney, summoned Team Alpha.

Thirty troops filled the deployment theater, armed to the teeth with every type of harsh, lethal weaponry known to mankind: Laser grenades, nanorifles, direct fusion weapons, perforating particle beams; pistols that shot bursts of compressed acid; grim, menacing shoulder-launched rocket guns and more, much more.

Most important, they had themselves some Big Fucking Guns.

Big Fucking Guns began as an experiment in alloy-gene fusing at the New University of California, Kingdom of Berkeley. The old matte-fusion devices had become unwieldy, the works clogged with an eldritch green slime. It was during this terrible ordeal that Helmut Kroeger, head of the Hitler Studies Department in the ice kingdom of Bavaria, expressed an interest in buying off some genuine rods of the Kellygirl before deciding to back off on his weapons plan, even though the NAR had strictly forbidden it.

Kellygirl blotters come off the line immaculate, tiny papers scripted with cartoon animals. It is necessary to consume the eye of the kat to obtain her knowledge. The script cannot be read except under special conditions. For this, the Kellygirls are required.

All downhill from there.

Unless you have the misfortune to be assigned Moon duty.

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The troops sagged under the weight of their equipment. One moment they'd been lolling in quarters, sharing raunchy stories and forbidden cigarettes; then, suddenly, they were hustling through gray steel corridors overlaid by cordons of blue laser light, as a klaxon blared overhead.

Most of the guys were weekend warriors, and only a few had seen actual combat. This was their trial by fire.

"Okay," said Maloney. "I want fifty troops stationed at the end of Quadrant C."

He consulted the moving red dot on his corneal implant. "Subject Jason Voorhees last seen proceeding due east from the area of the med unit. Save your firepower until he's right on top of you. We don't know what kills him—we'll have to throw in the kitchen sink."

An eighteen year-old NeoAfrican-American in the front ranks snapped Maloney a salute. "Kitchen sink, sir. We hear you."

"Good. I want the second squadron to proceed north across the perimeter—your job is containment. Flamethrowers only. I don't want to see any heroics. Guide him, goad him, do what you have to do, but get that motherfucker in the line of fire and keep him there. Understood? I want this to be tight. Pincer formation. No fuckups."

The squadron leader for Alpha Team B, a man named Etchison, saluted. The two groups jogged off to take their positions.

"Okay troops, I want everyone to engage eye-readers. Go to remote visual mode. Got it? See that red dot? That's our guy. And remember what the sarge said. Containment—no hero stuff. I don't want to see any lethal weaponry."

Flamethrowers puffing like anachronistic dragons, Alpha B swept by the tramping soldiers of Team Delta. Dressed head to toe in black jumpsuits, goggles strapped to their heads, Delta was on its way to secure the second floor. Delta's Team Leader made a totally unnecessary hand signal to indicate forward motion, accompanied by the grunted command, "Go, go, go!"

Delta's troops trotted up the spiral ladder that corkscrewed its way to the top of the building.

"Let's move!" yelled Etchison, inspired by the other squad's speed and efficiency. "Come on, get the lead out people!" What the soldiers saw first shocked and stunned them: the slaughterhouse of the Moon Camp dorms. Before anything else, as though in observation of ritual. Graffiti of arterial spray. Cryptic, oozing red letters in Aztec assembly code.

Bodies lay stacked on bunks like piles of cordwood; they hung from the ceiling, wrapped in multiple layers of cellophane, candelabras of smoking flesh. A mountain of astonished girl heads watched the TV in the lounge area. Disembodied eyeballs crawled down the walls like slugs. Arms still bearing wristwatches and neon bangles sat on a blanket of bloody feathers. Detached heads, jaws still animated by fading synaptic sputters, gave forth the latest gossip from the afterlife like a wretched yellow bile.

Two hardened grunts, guys who looked like they would weather the end of the world without much emotion, splashed green vomit in tandem over the scene. Etchison looked for a moment as though he were going to faint. But he couldn't let them see, let them know, the madness behind his eyes.

No. That would not do. Because then they would see the fear as well. And this simply would not do. Not the fear.

He coughed, squared his shoulders and brayed, "There he is!"

Jason Voorhees moved down Quadrant C in a dark, flaming silhouette. Over his shoulder he was carrying a girl's body, a bright pink nude except for knee socks. She was having tiny spasms. He shifted his weight to compensate. Jason snapped her neck in one long, clean movement like a freshly caught salmon.

"I want full flame, guys!" shouted Etchison, perpetuating the seafood metaphor. "It's lobster time." A dozen troops stepped forward into the hallway, flamethrowers coughing long jets of fire. The flames streaked over Jason's body, oil on water.

The girl? Toast. Assaulted by the ripe, stinging smell of burning flesh, the men stepped back. Its aroma was not exquisite. The corpse was still hot. Blackened, bloody sludge trailed the victim.

"Again!"

Crisscrossing trajectories, the soldiers caught Jason in a firestorm. The air began to boil like metal straight from the static irite foundries of Be-Tang.

"Stop! Hold fire! We're losing oxygen." A haze of heat distortion rippled over Jason's metallic flesh. He stumbled slightly and dropped the girl. She resembled a mannequin. Often, one does. After the accidental barbecue, that is. Scorched earth prophesies from the elder ones. Thick, blackish smoke rolls through the hallway. Much like the effects the dark molasses.

"Die, fucker, die!"

The soldier had emerged from the ranks with a shoulder-mounted grenade launcher. Etchison was unprepared for a renegade volunteer.

"Soldier, stop immediately! Put down your weapon!"

He didn't seem to hear. The grenade disappeared into the smoke. Detonated. Bright orange afterburn.

"Soldier, what the fuck is wrong with you? Stand down!"

The man was crazed. His sister had been among the dorm dead, hung upside down like a broken doll from the cafeteria ceiling. When he saw the monster, something snapped in his head. The tight restraint of military training pulled apart like weakened elastic.

This was personal. The beast would have to pay.

"I want that man restrained!" yelled Etchison over the tumult. Two grunts grabbed the renegade soldier and buckled him into a body bag, sealing it with strips of nanobar. "Ace of Spades, dudes," said one. "Only fucking card ya need! Whoo hoo!"

"Not like that, damn it! Give him some oxygen!"

The grunts obliged, tossing a portable air tank into the bag and resealing it. "We'll have to deal with that one later, there's no time. Fuck only knows what damage he's caused."

They crossed themselves up and down. Mr Fuck was a sick, scary son of a bitch.

Comme d'habitude, Jason was neither dead, nor injured, nor even badly shaken. Nevertheless, the grenade propelled him the last few steps to the end of the Quadrant. Where a little something calling themselves "Team A" awaited.

"Fire at fucking will!" shouted Team A's leader, Sturgeon.

Invisible bullets whistled and clanged, streaked and skittered over the walls. Affecting very little, actually. Jason's armor bounced them right back.

"Repeat fire!" yelled Sturgeon, who relied on sheer volume for most contingencies in life. "Photon guns, ready! And fire!"

Straw bullets completed their mission of aimless damage, punching out windows and slicing through the iridescent tubes of track lighting that lined the hallway. Thick yellow goop oozed from the ruined tubes. Hissed in steaming puddles on the floor. Showers of glass rained down on Team B, which was trapped in the smoking darkness. It appeared as though the mission had not been thoroughly coordinated. Headaches induced by close examination of drawings

by MC Escher. Packets of compressed photon bullets glanced off Jason's body and redounded on the soldiers.

"Fuck, my arm!" yelled a grunt as the light bullet tore through his upper body.

Bite me, Jason's body would say if it spoke. But Jason has no need for speech. While not a strong suit, Jason might reach back in his early memory for a rudimentary language, a thing of gasps, grunts and sudden fetal tyrannies in the manner of Richard the Third. Jason has no need for speech. He is Mr Fuck. The Endgame Man. The guy who says, "This is the final fucking floorshow. It's over. You will never leave hell again."

A gibbering composite of avant-garde stereotypes. Another boomeranging bullet tore off his arm completely, cleaving it to a useless hank of muscles, tendons, veins and nerve fibers. He fell sideways, trampled underfoot. Jason, however, was not affected.

The most the soldiers could do was freeze him to the spot, stop his advance—no more. Sturgeon looked puzzled.

"Why doesn't he die? Why doesn't he die?" he repeated. He looked genuinely baffled.

Milton's outcast Lucifer, Jason stepped through a pool of nacreous melted shrapnel. He caught Sturgeon by the neck. Wrung him out like a motherfuckin' chicken. Using the man's torso for leverage, Jason twisted off Sturgeon's head, caromed it into the troops.

Shitting and pissing themselves in terror, the stalwart men of Alpha Team A retreated before Jason's advance. Sturgeon's head, his mouth frozen in a bemused mask, rolled behind his squadron's stamping boots. In the frenzy, someone stomped it ovoid, then kicked it away. A lumpy soccer ball or rough equivalent, the head slid across the floor, smacked against the wall with a wet melon sound.

Then sat still.

\*\*\*

During the general mêlée, Minister of Disinformation Ken Otta was getting high with two of the Moon Campers. In the movies, this kind of behavior tends to slime the patronage of such with its own

slithery, unsexy exudates. If you hang out with the teen girls, and they're doing anything they're not supposed to be doing, which is all the reasons they're doing them, and you, God forbid, actually enable them, guess what?

You're meat for the beast. Jason food. So guess what happens now? Yup, you guessed it.

They all die. Jason Voorhees will make them die.

Slowly. It is his way. The way of Mr Fuck.

Lord Abortion. The Endgame Man.

\*\*\*

"Is this working?" Lisa Foxx shouted into her headset.

"Shit, you don't have to yell."

"Sorry, I'm just-"

"Yeah. We're all feeling it."

"This is Lisa Foxx, reporting live from Moon Camp. I don't know how to describe what's going on.

"What I can tell you is that... Oh my God, I think I'm going to be sick. It's the Green Deal all over again."

"Stay focused. You're still live."

"I'm still alive, you mean, motherfucker! A murderer is loose on Moon Base. He has already killed—I don't have exact numbers, but I understand that many... Hundreds... Oh the humanity!"

"Foxx?"

"Yeah."

"Get a grip."

"Huh?"

"I said calm the fuck down, sister. It's not the Hindenberg disaster you're making it to be. It's not even the Great 9/11 Conspiracy."

"That's easy for you to say, Roger. Where are you exactly?"

"You lying bastard. You know where I am. Inside your head."

"Yeah. You know, fuck you. I'm in fear for my life here. And all you can say is 'calm down' and play those stupid mindgames that used to be cute. Before a killer got loose and starting killing everybody in camp."

"We've got to stay focused. Be rational. Logical. It's the only way."

"Okay, Roger, you stay focused, rational and logical," said Lisa, her voice taking on an edge of hysteria. "I am getting the fuck out of here."

She spread both hands emphatically, like saw blades: "The fuck outta here!"

"You can't do that Lisa. The contract stipulates—"

"You know what you can do with your contract, Roger? Stuff it up your tight little sphincter. Because no contract is worth this." She huffed like a NeoMexican peasant in a space opera directed by Luis Bunuel.

"You know, you'll never work in this business again."

"Great."

Lisa Foxx ripped off her headgear and threw it into some bushes. Behind the bushes lurked a man. Half man. Half cyborg. One very, very mean sunovubyatch. The cameras were still rolling, capturing every second.

Lisa looked around. The camp looked as it always had, peaceable enough in a constructed type way. Rows of chestnut and fir trees rose up behind the cabins, one of which puffed a thick, healthy smoke from its chimney. Behind her, the lake sat blue, placid.

Then she saw him: Jason fucking Voorhees.

Lisa felt suddenly very sick to her stomach; her pulse began to speed. Surges of adrenaline rocked her body like little earthquakes. She felt frozen, immobilized. Blazing monoliths of hatred. Not certain at all what to do now.

Should she run for it? Give the fucker the chase of his life, even if he was apt to catch her and rip her head off? Make her die, slowly? Or should she present herself, a lamb for slaughter; not willing, but unable to make a decision. Stuck to the spot, pulsing, quivering. Like jelly being steadily pummeled by a man on the Mandelbrot.

"Lisa, look out!" came a voice. Fat Albert. The monster was closing in, fast as some relentless biomechanical shark, he kept coming and a'comin? Lisa saw a sudden flash-forward of her last moments, which was interesting, because she had started to move now. Her lagtime movements superimposed on themselves like a slow

montage of incense pictures. Wait, she thought. I can't give it up now. And so she ran. Away from the lake. Away from the cabins. Away from the set. Towards Moon Base.

In her peripheral vision, Lisa saw Jason. Right on top of her.

She already felt the chill rush of the machete through her ribcage—saw her body laid out on a morgue table, ready for dissection. Chill space of ancient galaxies.

Fucking ripe. (A doctor lunging forward. A spatter of artificial rain against black tarp. A jungle fortification, steaming; but no, wait. That was just a movie. This was just based on a movie. This is just a novel based on a book based on a book based on a movie.) Simultaneous with this vision, she moved.

She saw the sterile, monolithic structures of Moon Base rise up before her like eldritch tombs. Almost outside her body. Outside of the pain. The fear. The darkness that seemed to cover her head, swallow her limbs and taste her.

The snake that waited with a patient open mouth.

Coatlicue.

She found herself running up a steep beveled ramp, up an incline. Silhouetted figures glowed against hundreds of tiered windows. Somebody could help her. Hope was not lost. If she could just get to the Army base, get hold of a weapon, something to defend herself. Jason stopped at the bottom of the ramp. She could feel the heavy stomp of his tread in her bones as he ascended. Deliberately, but with great concentrated force.

A shark. A shark with all day to spend making figure eights through a widening ribbon of blood, knowing his victim just can't get away.

However close they come to escaping. Wait... Wasn't there a button or something for the ramp? Couldn't she bring it up? Fucking squish the bastard? She fumbled for a switch. An electronic panel. Her hand closed on something. She pressed the knob.

The ramp began to retract. Rapidly.

Jason fell off the edge.

"Yeah, fucking lie there, you shit!" Lisa screamed in fury and terror. "Fucking bitch-ass monster!" And a moment later, with added

emphasis, "Sunuvabitch motherfucker!" She paused to consider the Oedipal implications of her inner monologue. She was standing at the end of a long hallway like a very young Jennifer Connely in Dario Argento's classic film, *Creepers* aka *Phenomena*.

Cold, sterile track lighting glistened off blank white walls. Like a hospital. A morgue. A zombie palace. She heard something outside. A rattling in the walls. A chewing of the scenery. A very big rat.

Rats.

The rats were in the walls.

Lisa looked up, realized that her image was being caught on the surveillance cameras. An out-of-body experience, her fleet recognition. Somehow, the mistress of reality TV had become one of the screaming victims she'd so often pretended to be.

Her picture began to break up. A giant blowing out a candle. Whoosh. The rattling grew louder. Harder.

Shit. Of course he was still coming. Jason always did. It was the nature of the beast to keep coming. Relentless. Unstoppable. Unbreakable. A man of metal.

The ramp crunched like an accordion. And Jason came through the wall, predictable as the taxes of evil.

Oh dear Lord, she prayed, it can't end this way. Please don't let it end this way. Please don't let it end. I promise to be good. I'll behave myself. I'll be better than good. I'll turn over a new leaf. Practice something besides acting. Like devotion. She closed her eyes. Opened them. Felt her heart in her throat. And moved ass.

Lisa rounded a corner, hard, and almost slammed into Samantha and Yvonne.

"He's here, he's coming for me!" screamed Lisa. Her eyes shot through states of stochastic movement like the wave/particle humor of slot machines on Planet Vegas.

"What, huh, who?" asked Samantha.

"Jason fucking Voorhees, that's who! Move!"

"Oh."

"What are you, zombies? I said Jason's coming. He's right around the bend. The corner. Shit. Can't you hear that?"

Samantha shot Lisa a quizzical look. "Oh. No."

Lisa grabbed Samantha's hand and yanked her forward.

"Ow, that hurts!"

"Trust me honey, it's nothing to what's coming up."

"What's going on?" asked Yvonne.

"Aw, Jesus," said Lisa. "Just follow me."

\*\*\*

Busch stabbed at the keyboard. "Cooperate, damn you," he said slowly between clenched teeth. Gonzalez took a seat next to him.

"Mind if I look at that thing?"

It was not so much a question as a statement of intent. Busch looked up. Looked Gonzalez up and down, head to toe. Didn't like what he saw.

It wasn't just the dreads with blue highlights, the denim jacket slathered with patches, the outrageous leather boots, even the thin dark rectangular lenses Gonzalez peered through at him.

It was something else. The vibe. That whole cocksure, fuck you white man, I'm in charge vibe. Glistening skin of the ancient Maya.

But none of that mattered now. They were all in this trench together.

"Sure, Paco," Busch muttered remotely.

Gonzalez bit his tongue to keep from hissing. Lives were on the line. He would deal with white boy later.

"Looks like you're doing a thermal perimeter scan, right?"

"Yeah, that's what it is."

"Okay, so if you're going to do a scan, you need to make sure you've debugged the 'Net."

"What? Are you crazy? Or, how do you boys say it? Loco?"

Gonzalez took a deep breath. "I'm going to save your life now, buddy," he said. "But when I see you on the outside, you better be packing. Because I will kick your fucking ass so hard you'll be able to give yourself a rim job. Got that, pendejo?"

He had not moved. Busch didn't flinch. Without another word, Gonzalez scooted over to the comp Busch was using.

His fingers flew across the keyboard.

"Now, it's like this. We're cleaning up the white noise, see. Pink noise. Green noise. All sorts of subspace frequencies. Hailing codes from cargo vessels. Interplanetary warships. Terrorists from the Mujahadeen cluster. And fuck knows what else."

Fetal jockstrips stream from a dying planet.

"What the fuck?"

"You heard me. There's a whole lot of activity on this channel, for sure. Little terrorism action here, little government hacking there, a little phreaking, you know—"

"Where is he?" roared Busch.

"Oh, you mean our friend, Mr Personality? Hang on esse, I'm searching. Okay, here we go. Jason Voorhees is currently cutting a bloody swathe through Sector 4G, which is..."

Gonzalez carefully scrolled across the holographic map that blossomed in rainbow hues under his fingers, "which is here, right here. See where I'm pointing?"

Busch nodded.

"Right next to the main power station for Moon Base. Which gives me an idea." His face lit up like NeoMayan digital mystery caves.

Busch blinked. "What kind of idea?"

Gonzalez smiled. "I'm glad you asked. Why don't we turn this entire corridor into an electric fence?"

"Yeah, that'll do it."

You're fucking right that'll do it!"

Gonzalez scrolled his datagloves through the Unix-based system, grabbed a series of yellow rectangles that floated even with his chest and squeezed like a Carlos Casteneda guitar solo. The rectangles lit up in true Christmas style.

"Now all we have to do," said Gonzalez slowly, "is sit back and watch the fireworks display."

And added, with emphasis, "You fucking corporate drone."

Busch cracked an odds-defying smile.

"I still don't like you, but I like you, man."

"Just watch out. Patronizing motherfucker."

He feint-swiped Busch's neck. They both looked up at the monitors. Jason was having one hell of a time. A kid in a candy store.

A candy store that only stocked human limbs. Fresh, human limbs.

In one hand he held Lisa Foxx's head. Before him lay the shattered, bloody bodies of Samantha and Yvonne. He strode past the bodies. And hit the wall like a shortsighted mime. His body blazed with blue light. Hands clasped the air. He fell smoldering, a blue blob with a fluctuating outline.

"Cracks me up, man," said Gonzalez, laughing. Then Jason got back up. He invariably does.

"Oh, no." Busch clenched a meaty paw around Gonzalez's shoulder.

"What do you mean, oh no?"

"Oh, fuck no."

"Give me a clear answer, soldier!"

Gonzalez shot out of his chair. He stood face to face with Sgt Busch. "Let's get one thing straight, okay Johnny. "He placed a single index finger on Busch's collar. "I ain't a soldier in your fucking army. I am not a soldier in anybody's army. I work for myself. Do we understand each other?"

Busch felt for his fission pistol. "Get your hands off me, you little punk!" he roared. "And my name's not Johnny!"

Gonzalez backed off. "Okay, easy now. Gentle. The white man has centuries of rage to overcome. I understand that. Believe me. But now is not the time or the place. As you can very clearly see, we have bigger problems."

The bigger problem took this cue to punch through the wall.

In 1854, a British classics scholar and rhetor named Thomas De Quincey published an essay that would make his permanent reputation. Together with *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* and its sequel, *Suspiria de Profundis* (subsequently a classic horror film by Dario Argento).

The essay was entitled "On Murder Considered As One Of The Fine Arts."

According to this aesthetic codified by De Quincey, the terminally cranky upgraded semi-android psycho serial killer, Jason Voorhees, was starting his Blue Period.

"Stand back, everyone!" roared Busch. But it was too late. Voorhees was throwing firebolts like they were going to stop making them.

Funerolopis. Planet of the dead.

The blue balls crawled over men and women, shimmering, encasing them like insects in gasoline bubbles. Rats under glass. Peasants on napalm death. Running. Glowing. Burning. Dying.

The wall in front of him started to buckle and strain. A lightning crack ripped through the metal like a razor through wrapping paper. Busch looked up. A machete blade thrust through, clearing passage for a huge, bulky form.

Jason glared down at Busch with a zombie's canceled eyes. The meatball was trying to communicate, sounds Jason heard as pure white noise, signifying nothing worth the effort to decode it. Slow, bubbling froth of eldritch semen.

With the iron-jawed gravitas of a man trained to shit on command, Sergeant Busch released the safety on his BFG and trained the laser site on Jason's forehead.

"Stand DOWN, motherfucker!"

Jason turned his head quizzically. More static from the meat? Its jaws opened and shut, its color turning a deep, parboiled red. The meat was locked into the usual premortem subroutines, peaks and valleys on a voice track.

"Got a fucking hearing problem?" Busch blared. "I said, assume the position!"

Jason raised his machete.

Busch addressed the mic on his headset. "Okay, dancing kings, I need you to rendezvous back here. We've got ourselves a situation." The order exploded through the soldiers' headsets like a percussion grenade. Wincing, Fosse and Nijinsky shouldered their weapons and met at the hallway divider.

On their audio feed, shredding metal ripped through the haywire spikes of static bleeding from Busch's command. Followed by a sort of odd pulping sound, like mangos being chopped for fruit salad.

Busch saw a ripple of silver move through the air around him. Tiny pricks of pain erupted through his body.

"Assume-the-motherfucking-position," he said through a scrambled mouth. His vision was narrowing to a dark blur. The words came out in bubbles of foam and blood.

Busch clutched his throat. Blood from his cut outer carotid geysered through his hands in thick, bright red jets.

His legs were stalks of melting sludge.

"Glorp," he managed, his throat bubbling out the sound, as his neck slid away from his shoulders. As his ribcage descended into his thorax, his stomach spilled to the floor like a punctured hot water bottle filled with marinara sauce.

Actors in an early, pre-sound comedy film, Nijinsky and Fosse stormed through the door, weapons at the ready. As the grunts hewed to their military training, they saw, to their dismay, Sergeant Busch falling apart under the stress of battle. Literally.

Nijinsky's boots hit the slick, squishy trail of viscera and set him slipping and sliding, struggling to regain his balance. He yelped and stumbled backwards against Fosse, who propped him up only to himself slide forward into the bloody muck. The two soldiers went down like a chain of dominos.

Jason cocked his head to one side, as though bemused by this breakdown of esprit de corps. His machete arm went up, and down, up and down, swift and efficient as a threshing machine. The mound of carnage grew and grew, a wet, steaming mass of human compost. When he walked away, some of the mass was still twitching.

# FOURTEEN

I didn't think it would have to come to this, but I'm afraid we're going to have to bring in some heavy metal." Semiotic javascript assembled bits and pieces of protein engines by remote control.

"Meaning?"

In an area the size of an airplane hangar, gangs of robots assemble the Berserker. Things had come to such a pass. One weapon of mass destruction would now have to be deployed against another. Like Roger Ailes against Jim Carville. They had no choice. Every other trail led nowhere. Back to Palookaville. Only this was no Palookaville.

This was the Moon.

Moon fuckin' City. The Berserker was the brainchild of a thousand robot abortions, cobbled, compiled and scrambled from data assemblers, dope alignment engines, handheld chaos control devices, chains of radioactive isotopes kicking it like showgirls from Planet Vegas.

Protease inception machines donated by prone experimental victims courtesy of the NAR's long-lived MK-ULTRA program ravaged molecular structures, looking for an easy handheld, finding instead, reactive clumps of rogue proteins bearing weapons of mass desegregation. Piece from piece. At the molecular level.

"We can't have this boys," said the deputy in charge of Berserk Operations, one Seymour "Elmer" Fudd.

"See, the way I see it," said the deputy with a NeoTexan twang, "is boys will be boys." Green erotic fire flashed briefly in his eyes. "You understand. They just want to have a little fun."

"Do you mean, sir, that beyond the life-threatening mission this poses for us down on the ground level, sir, that the army regards this situation as a means of 'fun', sir?"

"Much like the rape of the robot drones. It's a bit of harmless fun, sir, if you'll just see my meaning."

"Did you know I could have you fractally dismantled for this?"

"Fractally, sir? No. I mean yes, it's technically possible, but you'd need a stargate for that."

"I think that can be arranged."

"Sir?"

\*\*\*

The Berzerker left Jason in chunks. Slices of pomegranate heavy with the blood juice. It didn't take long. The Berzerker had been designed for precisely this purpose—ripping Jason apart, grinding his flesh to chalk. Twisting his entrails. You know, the whole gore metal thing.

Just that, well, the project lagged behind its start date. About five months, actually. NAR bureaucracy at its slimy best.

Meanwhile, many had died. Many more, it would seem, would die. Fast, slowly, it made no ultimate difference. The Berzerker set to work throwing Jason experimentally against the wall. When he burst back, machete poised for some slaying action, the Berzerker hurled Jason into the wall by his legs. This time Jason sat there for a one second record, as though in thought. But not deep thought. Like some quick Zen.

In whichever form he was presently constituted, Jason Voorhees was not a Man of Thought. No. He was a man of action.

Dionysius was a man of action. The destroyer.

Who-so says the legend and ritual upon which it is based—must himself be destroyed. Ripped. Hewn. Blunted by weird instruments. Sawed off in unspeakable realms of the genitalia.

The Berzerker left Jason in chunks. To Castillo, this was like Christmas and New Year's in one. We can rebuild him, he thought. Make him stronger, better. We have the extreme technology.

\*\*\*

Indications of the coming chaos were all around. Strange rumblings from the hearts of space. Voodoo intuitions that flashed like wildfire through the Moon Base complex. Concepts so big and scary, they had to be broken down into palatable, bite-sized morsels

and contemplated piece by piece among a selection of mature adult individuals.

Fractal mutations so jaw-droppingly awful, they made every terror hitherto visited on Moon Camp seem frivolous and lightweight by comparison.

It was large. It was nasty. And it was heading their way.

The badness began with an idea. Castillo's idea. Something that would only seem plausible to a man who had devoted his life's work to making things a little more dark, a little less stable, a lot more evil.

A man who had convinced himself that he was the 25th Century's equivalent of Paracelsus, Dr Frankenstein, Bill Gates and, most horrible of all, Dr Wimmer's secret love child, built into one.

A guy with big ideas. And the big science to pull them off. Like thousands of tiny insect wings.

From an objective point of view, a vantage based strictly on rational objectives and methodology made plausible over centuries of flop sweat generated in underground labs on various planets; from that point of view, Castillo's plan looked fairly benign.

That is, the general parameters bore a rough resemblance to sober scientific practice.

Only on careful questioning of Castillo's intentions, a basic familiarity with his personal history and default state of mental health, and a handful of purple pills swallowed with neat whiskey; only then did the plan begin to fall apart.

Fortunately for Castillo, although rather unfortunately for the tattered strands of human population left on Moon Base, such controls were not in evidence. Nobody was left to mind the shop. Those who might have been able to stop the plan were either dead, distracted or otherwise engaged.

So Castillo began.

He had the basic ingredients. Pieces of the beast. The heart of the beast. Its black resin. Its sultry blood. Decades of Jasonania filling Major Tom's memory banks beyond capacity. Spilling out data like toxic waves into the interstellar aquifer.

Castillo's destiny was so far aligned with that of the monster, he no longer thought of the big picture, the overall scheme, the point. Scare

the girls and make them cry. That was all. That was his job.

Castillo had taken his job a bit too seriously.

Those remnants of the Moon Camp Americana population not severely traumatized by Castillo's predations wandered in mute agony along long corridors slathered with gore. They resembled refugees from the world of German expressionist film, one eye out for the sinister stage scenery and another out for the scary scientist guy.

They had seen their friends taken apart by fantastic devices. Been slammed against walls by powerful water jets. Been subject to a so-called "beauty contest" so inherently inhumane in its basic premises, it screwed objectivity itself. They'd had their brains subjected to a sinister process known to its advocates as "the erasure," to its best-known critics, as "Huh? Could you repeat the question please?"

But Castillo's focus had narrowed. A bit of a tunnel vision now. Concerned with consistency. The consistency, and quality, of his experimental work.

So, as he bathed Jason's limbs in smart medium welded him back together in small increments, checking the process, doing quality control, Castillo decided on one final experimental protocol.

Major Tom was housing Jason's brain. Or, to put it another way, Jason ran Major Tom. But Castillo ran Jason. Jason's actual body was irrelevant. True, it lay on the rack, ready for activation. But the real meat, the heart of the thing, lay with Jason's brain.

Jason's brain, hooked up to a matter compiler, a cornucopia machine. Now that was science. (Weird science, bad science, yeah. But you know what? Why don't you go read some Isaac Asimov and leave me alone?)

\*\*\*

And so they came. First singly, then in pairs, then in clumps; then according to a baroque calculus of need long percolating in the pulsing charcoal pit once housing Major Tom's brain. An army of nightmares.

Things beautiful to behold—if you were already the mother of a million abominations. Things rank in nature, foul in substance, gross in actual, life-sized proportions. Things only a Pamela Voorhees could love. Things devoted to a single, simple, dreadful premise: "Kill for me, Mommy." And thanks to the efforts of a dedicated crew working graveyard shift over many desolate moon months, the cornucopia machine on Moon Base was in fine working condition.

Teeth were clean, gears were polished, the running board free of obstructions. Fresh ants had been installed, plucked and tweezed of any mutations or instability.

On the day before Moon Base was opened for the summer season, its cornucopia engine looked like money. The disease had a linear drive that screwed merely objective science. Deep in the heart of a prurient darkness, a hothouse environment devoted to sickness—and the nurturing thereof—the things began to take shape.

\*\*\*

Annabelle Lee, a housewife in Brandywine, NeoCallie, NAR, turned away from the viddie set and hollered, "Eddie!"

Eddie Lee had become increasingly hard-of-hearing over the past six months.

Or so he had convinced himself. The woman over whom he'd come damn near killing a man had morphed into something else. A harpy. Shrieking. Flapping her wings.

The beast with breasts. While he attended to the beast's least need.

"Eddie? I know you can hear me. The doctor said there's nothing wrong with you. I looked at the report just now, myself."

"Okay, all right, I'm coming. Honey." Eddie tugged at his N-shirt and sighed. A big, rugged, manly sigh of resignation. What was she doing reading his confidential medical reports? And why had he married her again?

Because she looked so good in an N-shirt.

When she was nineteen.

"There's something wrong with the viddie," said Annabelle when Eddie lurched into the den, crimson rivers of shame flowing over his

cheeks.

His wife had taken to using weird Prevac slang lately. Among other, uglier habits. Did she have the bug powder addiction?

He looked at the set. Aside from the contents on the screen, it seemed to be working just fine. Crystal clear, in fact.

"That's bullshit, darling. I just bought it, remember?"

"I know Hon, but look..."

Eddie squinted at the screen. Over the familiar "Live from Moon Camp" logo, bizarre shit held sway. Something that looked like a detached arm, carrying a machete, lunged at the camera. The picture splintered, then automatically reformatted.

Like a giant had hit the lens, backed up. "Dude. My bad." Back to a wide shot.

"Holy Bob, that's frightening!" he said.

He wished he hadn't given up the Blue Death. Or, for that matter, the Green Death and the Orange Death.

"Dear, do you think the set's broken?"

"Er, um, no. I think somebody's gotten hold of a matter compiler. No, looks like a cornucopia machine. Same difference."

"What's it doing?" Annabelle asked.

"I'm fucked if I know. That is some bizarre fucking shit."

Eddie sat down next to his wife. "Do you have the remote?" he asked.

His tone had changed completely in the last thirty seconds, from mildly pissed-off to completely fascinated.

He'd heard about this happening, but had never actually see it with his own eyes. They sat together in silence. Eddie pushed up the sound. A roaring chaos. As though huge trees were being uprooted from a riverbank and used as demonic weapons. Engines of mathematically recursive dereliction leaked putrescence over the screen.

"Damn it, it's breaking up."

"But why should it do that? The signal comes direct from the..."

"Yeah, I know," Eddie said. "But wait. Unless that's another one of the creatures."

"What are they?"

"Did you see that?" Eddie asked suddenly.

They were looking at the view from a different camera. A huge bloodshot eyeball scrambled across the floor on little feet, its agenda unclear.

"That's wrong," he said, between shock and detached, intellectual speculation. "That's wrong on so many levels.

Then the pants marched by. They were black, stiff with what looked like blood. Invisible feet held them up. Basically just pants. Wrong had been redefined.

"Honey, what are you thinking?" asked Annabelle. "You're getting that look. That 'I need a Blue Death now' look."

"Yeah, but I know I can't do that. Have to stick to the program."

I have to stick to the program, he muttered to himself. He rose from the seat and began to move toward the kitchen. I must stick with the program, he muttered to himself. No more of this Days of Chaos, Days of Reckoning bullshit.

No matter what.

"Honey?" asked Annabelle.

"Yeah?"

"Are those ghosts?"

Eddie squinted at the screen. Some kind of yellow, glowing fog had coalesced. Within the fog, stray shapes moved. "I suppose they are." I suppose they are, he said to himself, sitting down again.

\*\*\*

JJ Gonzalez was floating in a hyperbaric chamber, trying to get his head together, when all the lights went out. The chamber's lid creaked open, the coffin of Poe's wettest dreams. At first, all was blackness.

Faintly in the depths, spectral robots sang "Annabelle Lee."

JJ massaged his eyes, trying to get his bearings. Surrounding him on all sides was a trekless night, a seething cave of negative space. Not so different, really, from the environment assembled by his brain within the chamber. But it sure felt different.

Placing his hands in front of his face, JJ moved carefully, making gradual progress toward a sliver of light that stealthily leaked beneath the door.

As he moved, his vision cleared.

As a teenager he'd experimented with sensory deprivation, trying to find his way around his own house with his eyes closed; later, having studied the cabbala and its associated texts, he had internalized a structure built of solid memory.

Still blind, JJ felt these tactile and perceptual skills begin to leak back into his nerves. Swarm his darkened senses with new life.

As he looked closer, JJ realized that the light was moving. As he approached the door, the light began to wink on and off. A semaphore. A binary language more primitive even than binary, a kind of Ur-assembly code: Yes, you live. No, you die.

Simple.

Jason's machete arm went up, and down, up and down, swift and efficient as a threshing machine. The mound of carnage grew and grew, a wet, steaming mass of human compost. When he walked away, some of the mass was still twitching.

\*\*\*

Long ago, Kat the Destroyer scurried out of that store, scuffed pearl face, single ruby earring, blackboot feet, pouting for companions in red satin, gathernights and glownights.

An eldritch book winked between her thin digits. This was a fey, fairygreen, leather-bound volume: *Eros and Tammuz*. Indeterminate insignia stamped her side in gold foil, the spectrum of a razor's edge; a sharp, blossoming wire rose. She saw and she read. She read some more, and saw, thought made flesh: words gathering gold sparkle, sheen, fullness. Radiance. Immanence.

Sharp words, words sideways and perplexed. Bothersome words. Bad words. Poison words, pinhead dots of mercury, scarab arabesques; tinctures; blood gems from Satan's wineglass, and silly words, like "Trismegiste."

Some books wore the devil's own claws. Words sat against her chest, burning coins, dark things, real words. She cradled them in secret—perplexed, changeful things. Made him suck hoses. She mothered and fed them, like squiggling neon worms; and then, when she ate them, all the kids died.

Bad words. Curse words. Swear words. Oaths.

She whirled, electric, counterclockwise, leaves zigzagged in the gutter, red and brown, then softly whispering black to plump rot, the lingering caresses of a careless giant. Tammuz is one word for taboo.

Her son and brother, he is also her lover Tammuz burns like frozen nitrogen.

She waved at a couple in a port-colored coupe; they moved to Arizona and started a sheep ranch. The cop at the soda fountain, eating an ice cream, crumpled himself in the racing paper, oblivious as so much human origami. Seven Gates was the horse to bet on; that's what the paper said. Or maybe it said, the seventh gate.

The store was even shaped like a big fairytale housebook. Within, many powerful books lay hidden, many grimoires and grammars. Harrowing opiate foundlings. Shadowbooks, etched from pain. (Hellebore, henbane, belladonna.) Razorbooks. Bloodtomes.

All fall down.

Many volumes, lovely lovely. Rubyvoodoo nails clacking. Sorting, counting, smelling. The perfume of black leather; the sting of salt tears. So many owners, such legacies, such ribbons of cobwebs of ghosts, spun from one another. Raven silk, many wonders of the world; travel, what is this one. And yes, *The Three Mother's Opera*, by Vermicelli and Morelli.

First edition, hardcover.

Best offer. Diner's Club, definitely.

Many of these tomes have been inscribed secretly by the great lady herself. Some bear her initials scratched into the binding. Others hold her signature in cryptographic and mirrored forms. All children of Dolores display her mark in some way. This one we hunt, this one we bind; this one we snatch, this one we find.

Ashes, ashes...

She stepped closer to the cop, a lie, a black book with gilt pages and a scarlet ribbon. Watches the fire fairies dance over his cigarette, watches them sway, shudder, dive; a hand at his throat; cancer, the plague, sudden death, swallowed up. Raven's wings cast glamorous shadows.

She stopped, the game no longer amusing; plopped the cop harmlessly back on the shelf. The lively puppet folded his paper into a neat cylinder. Kat passes.

We all do. She prayed and passed, a book pressed against her chest, a slight volume in green and gold.

They lived; but she read them, knowing their secrets and lies. How they flourished (some lost their way). How some writhed, shrink-wrapped in digitized plastic, in perfect equanimity; tapping away on an ever-shrinking keyboard with one key: a dollar sign. What they told their wives and their sluts and their dogs.

When she returned, she would draw a bath. Soft lights, champagne; or maybe a glass of red wine. The water, cooked to perfection. Bright bubbles, gathered at her breasts. Music: George Crumb, Liszt; funeral contagion chords. Her black cat, Ecclesiastes, scrabbling away in the kitchen at its breakfast tray. The sun, turned upside down. And absinthe for Ereshkigal.

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He stopped. Waited. Taking a deep breath, JJ pushed open the door and stepped out into a sea of glowing ghosts. This was the point in the dream where he always woke in a cold sweat, his breath coming fast and furious.

Who will remain Dracul? Knuckles whitening around the bedsheets. But safe, anyway, in his bed. He closed his eyes again and willed the ghosts away. Demons, be gone. Out of sight. Out of brain. Cast back into whatever pit of creative will spawned you crazy motherfuckers to begin with.

Counted to ten. Opened.

They were still there.

The ghosts of Jason's victims, still garbed in the fantastic motley of their demise. Banquo's shade, status post-accidental immersion in a cornucopia machine.

Blinded. Headless. Feeling their way along corridors. Spurting stumps where their hands should be. Trying to walk without knees. Trying to talk without mouths.

All looking at JJ.

Supplicating him. Commanding him to their aid. "Show a little mercy. Stop the psychic bleeding. Stop the little bubbles. You know. The blood bubbles. Show us the short way out of hell."

Please.

Their voices mingled and seethed inside his brain; an asylum choir. As they spoke, he saw what they had seen in the end. Felt Jason's implacable machete slice through tendon and muscle. Through meat, straight to the bone.

Nice.

Felt the icy shower release of sliced internal arteries. The terrible swift coldness of it. The frost without end. And melting into eternal night. Like that night. The night that never stopped.

JJ heard something else in the fog. Amanda. Crying for help. Or was she mumbling feebly, through a mask of some sort? Yes, a mask, within a metal web.

It was time to visit Akasha.net.

If he could just fend off the ghosts, that is. Or feed them. Whichever was easier.

\*\*\*

She was floating in an abyss of some kind. Where, or how, or why, Amanda was unsure. She only knew that her body was in pain. What she could feel of her body. Pain was definitely in session.

Her joints hurt. Her muscles hurt. Ligaments felt wrenched. Her eyeballs subtly pierced (how was that even possible?) by tiny steel implements. Her spine wrenched into a degrading position. Mouth mummified in coils of rubber. Breathing through vents in some unknown conical device.

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"This is a direct fusion gun," JJ said. Just like that. No preamble. Helga looked up. It was indeed.

"Step away from the apparatus." Amanda was trying to communicate, a dubious process indeed considering her lack of access to a working jaw.

"Step away from the fucking apparatus!"

He paused to consider the absurdity of that command, once a modifier had been placed there. But pressed on. Helga reached for something. JJ fired. Helga's brain splattered against the laboratory wall. The rest of her body had contorted into a sort of sculptural mush.

"Fucking Nazi!" screamed JJ.

He stepped up to the baroque device, the thing that held Amanda within a web of rubber and steel, pipes coursing with strange yellow liquids, caverns measureless to man; this was some Cruella De Ville shit.

Found Amanda's mouth. Unplugged it.

Amanda sputtered. "What took you so long?"

"Is that gratitude for rescuing your life, bitch?"

"Just get me out of here."

\*\*\*

They always came in the dark. The monsters. Juan couldn't see them. He didn't want to. He didn't dare do more than peep through the web of his fingers, praying for the morning sunlight to grow roses through his flesh. Even with the thorns. Through the screen of terrorized blood. Let it be okay.

His heart went to his throat. Funeral warheads, ready to strike. He couldn't cry out, even if he wanted to. Couldn't make a movement. Didn't dare make a sound.

In hyperspace, nobody gives a damn.

Juan listened, and waited, trembling. Clinging to his bedsheets. Squeezing his eyes shut. Thinking of a power animal. A jaguar. That's

it.

He knew this was his power animal because the old lady, his aunt, the one they called Bruja, had shown him through the drink.

An oily potion, a thin scrum of leaves scattered across its surface. When the Bruja stirred it with a stick, it popped and bubbled. Strange smells, virile as a Hemingway brewery. Smells of the jungle. Grown-up smells. Musty dream smells.

He couldn't place them then, of course, couldn't trace their specific trajectory; back to an act of love, an act of death, an act of friendship.

But when he drank the brew, the world disappeared.

It was simple. Like stepping through a mirror, only to see yourself. Stepping away from yourself. Simple.

Then Juan was in a different place. A place that resembled Earth II, only more magical. Transmogrified in some unknown fashion. It felt like home. Like peace. And in this place of peace, he was a cat. Only here they called 'em kats.

Seeing with the eyes of, breathing with the mouth of, stalking the prey of: a jaguar kat.

Then he was safe.

Yet still, he couldn't find a way to bring the jaguar back. The Bruja said that the animal belonged to his ancestors. People who lived long ago, on a place called Earth Prime. Who spoke a language similar to, though not identical with, his own.

"Have courage," said the old lady. "One day you will be able to bring the jaguar home. You will become the jaguar. Manifest its spirit. But not now."

He didn't know if he could survive the biweekly monsters. So he squeezed his eyes shut. Waiting Trembling. Clutching hard at his pillowcase. Like an altar boy, apparently.

He was hurt, angry and confused. The good place he went was as peaceful and becalmed as the terrible, fearful place that masqueraded as his home.

Sometimes his dad would come home smelling like a distillery. His mother wept then. Cursed. Rained tiny fists against dad's oxen chest.

Oxenblood.

Dad brushed her aside. Sometimes hit, bitch-slapped, fucked up her face. It felt like he was hitting Juan. As though he and his mother were just one creature, one heart pierced through, again and again. Very rarely, his father came home in a different mood.

One of exultation. Hope. Discovery.

Then he sat Juan on his knee, and told him secrets. How the planets moved. How the grass grew. How the jungle became the jungle. He showed Juan pictures in his mind, like the Brujua, only these pictures came directly. Without interference. Without drinking anything.

No minimum bar tab.

Pointing to the chill clarity of the night sky, his father told him stories of the constellations. Of the Prevac times. Of the giant space ark that carried the remnants of civilization from Earth Prime to another planet.

He told Juan of the Korkovs. Juan could imagine them, these catlike creatures hunched over the dials, bells and whistles of faster-than-relativity ships. Ships that moved on pulsions of light. That moved with the speed of thought.

For many centuries, his father told him, the Korkovs had tried to communicate with humans. Sometimes the transmissions contained serious content: technology, hardware, software.

Most often, though, the transmissions contained jokes. Jokes only some kats will understand. Or want to, for that matter.

"You will not understand now what I am telling you, Juanito. But some day you will meet these creatures. They are vastly superior in every way to human beings, yet they possess one massive flaw.

"Their sense of humor. It's too strong, too strange, built on an intelligence we can only sense. Can only imagine."

Juan wondered why humor was a flaw. How the most intelligent creatures in the universe could build spaceships they didn't fully understand. How these beings emulated a culture long dead, a place and time forever removed from his own.

It was, in a word, uncanny.

Consider a slagheap of a planet, burning day and night with thick reddish clouds of toxic chemicals. Pollution. Pollution that killed,

that watered your eyes until they burst. That filled up your chest with a deadly weight.

Rare sunlight, filtered through a Technicolor blaze, followed swiftly by toxic rain that ate through granite.

"When our ancestors moved to Earth II, it was because of the Korkovs. Never forget that. When your aunt gives you the drink, and you remember the jaguar, it is because the jaguar is you.

"It will always be you."

Juan wondered how he could be a little boy and a jaguar too. There were so many things he didn't understand. But as the elders said in fake Mexican accents, their resignation to the white man's ways simply palpable, "Que sera, sera."

He ached to be grown. Powerful. A strong and wise man. A man with the heart of a jaguar. Its fierceness. Its glowing eyes. Its Castanedian, reel it in knowledge base.

He wanted to be able to fight them, the ones who came in the night. The ones who took what was most precious, most dear to him, and returned it with wounds. Scars. Silence.

The sounds they made were terrible, yet hard to decipher. He felt the vibrations of heavy boots, saw the crisscross trace of laser sights, as he struggled in vain to block it all out. The image of one of those boots crushing a human face forever. But he could never fully block the monsters.

Because they weren't monsters after all. Even he knew that. Monsters were unreal. You place a hand over their ugly jaws. Bad things vanish. Disappear.

The monsters in human shape—that was another story. He knew they were human, because they spoke a language that sounded like espagnol. But it was quicker, more fleeting, more cursory than that.

The syllables dribbled in like a hoar frost. It is a language you weather. As your shadow grows ice crystals. After the monsters, his parents vanished for days at a time.

He could see traces of what they had endured. The pain they had suffered. That was written in the contours of their faces, in the depths of an eye, in a slight pause before speaking. Hesitancy. And

these were educated people. Deeply civilized people. People of firm convictions.

Hesitating.

Until the day his parents never returned. The day the monsters, the men in their black jumpsuits and infragreen goggles, didn't bother with stealth. They simply knocked the front door off its hinges. Pushed their way in.

And stole his heart. But Juan had determined to be brave. At five years old, he understood. When his parents departed for good, he had to be the responsible one.

The one who waited, soaked up knowledge and acquired skills. The one who bore a weight of memory, and chipped that memory. Bent, burned, hardened. Blackened that shit, into a weapon of choice.

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For a moment, JJ Gonzalez couldn't figure out where he was. The compartment was tiny. His head felt dry, a husk drained off all memories, substance. His entire body was throbbing. A giant blanket of pain. He glanced around him. Followed with his hands the contours of the compartment. It sloped up and continued around again.

Holy mother of fuck, the thing was circular and laced with a cynical elegance, like a low-class strip joint. Tiny vents provided oxygen.

A low-frequency hum sounded from an unknown source. He felt his hands. Massaged them. His nerves tingled, as though they had been frozen and suddenly woken from the ice. He was suddenly very, very hungry.

He felt his face. It was larger than before. Padded, somehow.

Then a tiny door opened into the tiny compartment. A serving tray slotted through the door. The door sealed shut. Gonzalez looked at the tray. Carefully shrink-wrapped were three thimble-sized cups of something gray, and a vial, which he recognized as a tincture.

A small paperback volume, bearing just a smudge of marmalade.

He stabbed the shrink-wrap with a fingernail. It opened up so easily. Like some bitches he knew. He grinned at his cartoon reflection. Like a bit of the wolfhound, eh?

Gonzalez looked first at the book. Maybe this would provide answers. He needed answers, because the questions were multiplying exponentially in his mind. Why the number zero? Who is pi? And why did he want to be rooted, for fuck's sake, square or not.

Later he would remember long periods of quiet, shot through with something like crackling static. He remembered the faces hovering over him, vague, jellylike blobs that slimed and twitched in the dark.

Unbearable heat, followed by unbearable cold. And then, just the slightest brush with pain. A pinprick, really. He didn't know what to call it. How to determine sensation anymore. What to call the things that happened when his body moved. Gravity, nonsense.

Up and down had traded places so many times, their exact whereabouts had become unlikely, although traced to an approximate GPS of forty degrees north longitude, then lost to time.

"Covert Operations Manual," read the book's title page. "Property of NAR."

Idly, Gonzalez glanced through its contents. It was a dossier of sorts. Itemizing, in almost pornographic detail, the life and crimes of one Dr Armando Castillo.

He didn't recognize the face, the mustached gentleman who erupted from the pages of the hardcopy like some Prevac TV genie. Twisted, bent over a laboratory pallet. Smeared with a dark crimson substance, like an old Italian sauce.

That was old blood. That was the voodoo shit. Juan immediately felt a chill. His guts turned over, because he knew the eyes. He didn't know whether to be ill, to laugh or cry. The eyes told him something crueler than anything he'd understood since childhood.

They were the eyes of the monsters, the ones who'd taken his heart. He slammed the book shut. Looked at the food items. Considered the menu choices. It was a grim business, but Gonzalez figured he could choke down the gray meats. At least it was sustenance. Nourishment. He would need that. He would need to be strong, if he wanted to defeat the man.

He forced himself to look again. And again. The eyes seared through him. Interpenetrated his like clasped black and white hands in a German Expressionist dramaturgy.

He could feel himself growing faint, miles away from his body. As in childhood, fading away. Going to the place they called Akasha.net.

\*\*\*

They called him the Black Metal Kid. Nobody knew where he came from. What he was doing there. Why his teeth were so large. Why, despite repeated warnings, he never brushed those teeth.

Why he didn't care that he'd developed the green rot.

But once the Kid arrived, people started hearing a brand new vocabulary. Things like Julian connecters. Pinz-Braun cytometers. Cyber-Roshi instant funeral generators. Rotwang killers. And the Full Reality Hack.

By the time JJ Gonzalez arrived in the City, he had heard the name many times. Whispered to him in the lurid shadows of peepshow parlors. Languorously breathed at him through the glossy lips of an old black drag queen.

"Honey, you're gonna want to say hello to the kid."

Arabesques of blue smoke.

"For your information. I mean, I'm not tellin', I'm sayin! Okay?"

Nervous around strangers, JJ nodded. And swiftly turned the corner. Where more strangers awaited. Venusian flesh pirates. Korkovian reality splitters. You know the kind. They were not gentle people. They were not kind people. They had no interest in your politics.

No. They only wanted your brains. No. Not even your brains. Just the realities you keep inside them.

The Black Metal Kid trailed into town like an old cowboy passing down from the hills. As he walked he exuded a spectral gray residue. He was more like a phantom than a man, more an essence than a thing, something insubstantial but no less clearly evil for that. He carried the tools of his trade in a black metal box—hence the moniker

—and plied them on strangers until he'd worked up the experience and nerve to ply those tools on himself.

As the legend went, the Black Metal Kid disappeared for a few months, returning to the virtual village with a hole in his head the size of a drill bit. It seems that he had been researching in obscure Prevac rituals, during which certain individuals, feeling that only radical surgery will ease the pain in their heads, drill voluntary holes through the cerebral cortex, essentially self-lobotomizing.

Evidence of the success or failure of these experiments remains fragmentary. Some texts say yes, others no. Others are shy, looking for recognition from the public but afraid to just demand it. Others lack the appropriate citations. Appendices. Etcetera.

According to the doctrine extolled by the Black Metal Kid, fear was the last thing anyone would ever have to worry about. Again.

"Try it out," he'd say, pressing the trigger of his drill experimentally against your skull. "See how it handles. I like it, especially on curves." With a sinister leer, the Kid traced a design around his own medulla.

"Keep it," he'd say as the volunteer swayed back and forth, blood geysering from the drill wound in his forehead, limbs twitching with the last synaptic shakes.

"There's more where that came from." Experimentally, he wet his finger and stuck it in his own hole. Nice and clean.

\*\*\*

When JJ saw Amanda for the first time, several things happened. First, she lifted him like a bit of the thornapple. Some archaic sense of the platonic true and good. A duty that no longer mattered.

Still, he recognized some basic nugget of truth there. As though a voice had been whispering to him all along, but only now had he stopped and bothered to pay attention.

Or perhaps he had been forced to listen.

Amanda was quicksilver: the quick flash of a smile. The way she passed her hands through her hair, as though she could stimulate her follicles into thoughtfulness. He had to speak to her. JJ knew in some

deep way that she was responsible for his being here. But how? And why?

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"But I did, though."

"You called me."

"Yes. Remember the canine AI?"

But how did she know about the canine AI? Had they been listening in? What sort of scrambled nonsense lurked behind the prim concavities of this godforsaken asteroid?

JJ felt scared and excited at the same time. He recognized the symptoms: a bit of the old interstellar overdrive. His goose was cooked. This was just like the Great Kat, only infinitely stronger. He was not getting away from it. Not this time. Love at first love bite.

They sat side by side. Not speaking, not moving. Not daring. Saying yes and no in their hearts, but not believing. Not wanting to believe. Not wanting not to believe. Confused. Excited. Frightened. Wanting to flee. Dying to know.

"You mean that was you?"

"You're a bright man," said Amanda with just a trace of sarcasm. "Yes, that was me." He was so fucking cute. She was turned on like a power plant on the dust planet, Syrinx. Oh, Baudelaire! Oh, Mister Fuck!

"But how did you..."

"It was a simple matter, really. My dad created the propaganda campaign for this place. I knew about you because every time I did a search, I mean googled, your name kept popping up. It was eerie. I was almost angry at you."

"Angry at me? But why? You didn't even know me."

"True," Amanda conceded. "The thing of it is, I knew you were in terrible danger. I disintegrated the black ice around some files from the Prevac period, and then I ran them through the integral database around cityofdiss.com.

"So what did you find?"

"I found out about your parents. About El Mysterioso. The experiments in the jungle. And Dr Castillo."

"I guess I shouldn't be shocked or surprised," said JJ with a smile. "Even though that data officially got swiped, there's still enough people around who can recite it chapter and verse."

Amanda smiled too. "Like the forest people in *Fahrenheit 451*."

"Yes, it does smack of the Bradbury hand." He reflected on this a moment. "Yes, exactly. Maybe it's too coincidental, now that I think about it."

"Is anything too coincidental anymore?"

"You're referring, of course, to the Singularity."

"Well, yes, and other things." Amanda's voice trailed off. She was thinking of other things. Specifically, she was imagining Juan naked. At her side, Juan imagined her under similar conditions. And blushed ever so slightly.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" she asked prettily.

"Could be," said JJ. "It definitely could be."

And maybe, just maybe, it had to be.

\*\*\*

The Armageddon question required serious thought before its obedient servant, logic, could refute it. President Fitzimmons stabbed the red hotbutton on his console. There was something so authoritative, so downright Presidential, in doing that. (Note to self: think up other Presidential shit to do and do it while it's still fresh in your brain.)

His index finger tingled like the old Midas.

"Speak to me. Tell me what's on your mind." He felt more like an old radio shock jock in exile than real presidential timber. (And that timber wasn't holding so steady these days.)

Fitzimmons was cultivating a garrulous mood tonight. A mood shortly to be taken apart, piece by piece, by the incoming caller.

"Sir, it's your deputy at Moon Base, sir."

"Yes, Mr Brandon. What's going on up there? I get different reports. I start to worry, then somebody tells me not to worry. Why?"

I don't know what to do with all these conflicting stories. Perhaps you could clarify."

Corky Brandon cleared his throat. Straightened his tie. Looked down at the floor. At the camera. Squinted at the camera.

"I'm afraid we've reached a terminal stage, sir."

"A terminal stage? What the hell kind of gibberish is that? Speak to me like a man, dammit, or I'll have your tongue cut out for you and mounted above the White House fireplace."

"Sir?"

"Metaphorically speaking, of course. Ha ha."

President Fitzimmons paused to enjoy a moderate laugh. "I'm the boss. Need the info. Fill me in."

"Well, sir," Brandon squeaked, "frankly sir, there's been a bit of a mess here. We're looking at many casualties. The culprit is unknown."

"Unknown? What the fuck have you been smoking, Brandon? We've got day and night viddie surveillance on all levels of Moon Base. We've got nanocams crawling up the, uh, substellar ass, for Chrysler's sake. I can feel the bastards coming on like a bad case of the Plutonian 'roids!"

"How can you say the culprit is unknown? Have you no dignity, sir? At last, sir, have you no dignity?"

"Technically speaking, sir, there's more than one. But it's a very, very sensitive situation. People might be listening. I'm not sure I can speak freely. Sir."

"You'll have to speak freely, or you'll be getting around on two bloody stumps."

"Sir?"

"Ha ha. Just my sense of humor. Nothing a few martinis won't cure you of. The chief executive needs to let off steam once in awhile."

"Permission to speak freely. Sir."

"We aren't in the army here, Brandon. You don't need to do that shuffle with me. You know I'm one straight-ahead Prez."

"That you are sir. Well, it would seem that Dr Castillo has been at the monkey sauce again."

"Dr Armando Castillo?"

"The same, sir. I thought you'd been debriefed."

"No, my briefs are still holding tight, thank you very much. Debriefed... let me see. Ah yes. Make it de briefest point you can, and we can all go home. It's been a rough day." He wagged an imaginary cigar like 19th Century Prevac philosopher Groucho "The Antichrist" Marx.

"I see. Begging your pardon sir, but the situation is very serious. It seems as though Castillo's been, um, poaching some of the Moon Campers for use in what appear to be..." He cleared his throat. "Fiendish experiments. Sir."

"And your point being?"

"My point being, not only does Castillo have zero authorization to perform these experiments, but they actually involve murder and mutilation. For starters. It's like some horrible Prevac Mondo film. Some of the later Italian gialli; I mean, when torture by headpress is only the beginning!"

"So he's just plucked off some of the rotten fruit. It's called horticulture. Look into it."

"Sir?"

"Stop wasting my time, Brandon. I have a social engagement to attend."

(And that engagement was not smoking itself.)

President Fitzimmons zapped Brandon back into the ether.

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"Gracie?"

"Yes, Mr President."

"Hold all my calls. I need to be alone."

"Yes sir. Holding all calls."

President Fitzimmons wheeled his chair around. He was staring at the wall. His illustrious forebears stared back at him. Pursed lips. Tightened eyes. Withered fingers clutching crabby chins. A bit of the old Aqualung, eh my brothers?

They appeared to subtly mock his authority.

There was something cartoon-like, overdone, frankly crude, about the portraits. They're alive, he thought suddenly

"Gracie?"

"Yes, Mr President."

"Could you have these portraits removed?"

"But..."

"I didn't appoint you to 'but, but' me, Gracie. You will have these portraits removed. They're interfering with my concentration."

He leaned forward with a meaningful look in his eye. "And you know how I get in a crisis."

Gracie: (Thinking): red in the face like a parboiled lobster.

Gracie: (Saying): "I'll have a team in to remove them at once, sir."

"Good. I like that. Short and sweet. Authority speared down on sub-authority. Yessir. Simple. Clarifying. Like a frog on a toothpick. You can practically hear the bones crack!"

He wheeled around again. Felt those faces behind him, the eyes like drumbeats in his head. Like spears illuminated against flickering gray spectres of the jungle.

He fished around in the desk drawer, removed a pair of antique scissors. He had the advantage of surprise. As President, he might use that advantage. To his advantage. Advantageously.

Taking the scissors, he began making hideous rips in the canvases. Tearing out faces, punching out hands.

Punishing the sinister bitches from his life. By Chrysler and Bob, he would go down fighting.

"Sir?" Gracie peered her head in the door. "I know your instructions were, uh, very explicit, but it's Mr Brandon again. Says it's a matter of life and death."

"Life and death, eh? Well, I don't want to seem like a bad sport. Put him on again."

The President clipped a fat cigar. Twirled a wooden matchstick to the tip, just so, and exhaled two perfectly formed smoke rings.

"Brandon, eh? Is that what you said your name was?"

"Yes, Mr President. You deputized me, sir. Personally, that is."

"Oh, Mr Brandon. That was a long time ago. And you know how I make these decisions. Not wishing to sound arbitrary, but sometimes

the weight of command... You know how it is." The President sounded like an Antebellum gentleman preparing to sip of the julep.

"Frankly I don't, sir. That's more of your department."

"Are you contradicting me?"

The President had begun to shake like a man in the first rising strains of a Mandelbrot frenzy.

"Really. I would never, never contradict you sir. I'm not sure how much more time I've got. To live, I mean."

"Oh, it's that bad, eh?"

Behind Brandon, a huge shadow hove into view, followed by the grip of a mangling hand.

Correction: The grip of a mangling hand that could mangle the living shit out of all other mangling hands.

"I'm really, really sorry sir. I'm afraid..."

The President perked up. He hadn't seen actual gore/carnage action like this since the last Roger Bordeaux Production. And the President was a huge fan.

Brandon's head disappeared. In its place, a geyser of blood shot skyward like that of the ancient Azteca snake goddess, La Coatlicue.

"Fascinating," said the President. "Now that is some reality fucking TV. Eh Gracie? Gracie?"

# FIFTEEN

Dr Castillo gazed at his reflection in the mirror. He was naked, covered with bumps, bruises, scratches and tiny whelp-like cuts. His reflection stared back at him. Hard.

Pinkie 3K, his robot mistress, had beaten the living crap out of him. On orders, of course. That's why he'd grown her. To punish him. For being a man. For being alive. For having shameful, lustful thoughts. For not having shameful, lustful thoughts. For having some of those less than savory nasty thoughts once in awhile.

Okay, a lot.

Obsessively.

His reflection quivered like a blob of mercury on the eyes of a blind sexbot. Melted X-ray style. A hand punched through the glass like a disenchanted finger puppet on orders from Pandemonium itself.

Jason Voorhees. Not too tender, not too sweet. Not too tart. Not too acidic. Not too much garlic. Don't want to ward off vampires, just keep them away from my killing path. Eh?

Just right. Oily bodies writhed under black metal stirrups. Corruption and lies. Damn lies. And, ah yes, the horror. The horror. The motherfucking horror. The extreme motherfucking horror. Metal in your eyeballs!

Jason gripped Castillo's throat with his left hand. His right digits fisted three shiny mirror fragments. Daggers for the mind's eye. Castillo's artificial orbit began to malfunction, as the dagger came closer. Streaks of green neon fire-napalm and dry ice. And a little Utility Fog.

He could see upside down, watch the entire scene float out beyond his body. The dagger found its mark. The old in out, in out. Jason dug the glass splinter from Castillo's bad eye. Straight cuts through to the brain.

"Is this the end of Mr Johnny?" asked Castillo of his killer.

Actually, Castillo's last words consisted of much muttering, sundry curse words, and the faintest hint of a "D'of" right before he expired.

The eye geysers blood. Vomits forth maggots. But no, not yet.

As Dr Castillo feels himself growing weaker.

And weaker. Smaller. And more.

His feet melting into the floor. He wanted to say something; to bargain, plea for his life. Can't we negotiate something? Is this the end of Mr Johnny? We would have made a great team, you and I.

You the brawn. Me the brains.

Using Castillo's body as a brace, Jason pushed the doctor on his back. Wrenched his right arm from its socket. The arm gave way with a slight, wet popping sound, like a small frog under a heavy boot.

Jason pulled harder. The arm gave way. Thwacked that shit against the opposite wall. And began on the other. When Jason was finished with him, Dr Castillo was fully abbreviated.

A torso, actually.

His legs curled up beside. His head sat in the corner, good eye still twitching. The jaws moved up and down, up and down, making soft, sibilant hissing noises.

Jason raised a massive foot. Bore down. The head crumpled beneath him like a pulped watermelon. Jason bore down, harder, extruding brain matter from Castillo's skull, like a bit of the old oatmeal.

His blood began to gather, gather on the tile floor. Blades crushed down on the technonut. Reducing his head to the skull of a fucking robot. Come inside, our morgue is nice and cold.

\*\*\*

Commander Tom Rimbaud of the Interstellar Starship *Maldoror* bore all the classic signs. This was clearly a man who'd been partying nonstop with whores from the nomadic, heretical Shiite pleasure station *Hassan I Sabbah*, and wanted nothing more than a long, intimate engagement with sleep.

His skintight uniform was flecked with a light glitter dust, smeared with aqua lipstick and traces of unknown fluids. He rubbed his eyes with a sleekly black-gloved hand. His sinuses subtly fogged.

"*Maldoror* here, who is this?" Rimbaud's speech neohad the furry-tongued languor of the Confederacy. He squinted at his own screen.

It came back into focus, gradually. Then too big. He dialed it down quickly. Too much, too early in the day.

"The name's Gonzalez, JJ Gonzalez. Sir, we've got a big, big problem here."

Rimbaud hastily checked the Moon Base manifest. "Mettre le lit inconnable avec la merde. Yeah, says here you're a civilian tech support. You've got no official clearance to engage this channel."

Gonzalez took a deep breath. "Sir, there's no time to explain. I'm talking to you because... Well, sir, the impossible has happened." He cleared his throat, subvocalizing, "The really, really fucking impossible, sir."

"Could you define impossible, Mr Gonzalez?"

Rimbaud disappeared from the screen for a moment and reappeared with glazed eyes and white particulate matter clinging to his nostril hairs. "Do you mean that—?"

"Jason is loose, yes. He's unstoppable."

"Well we know he's unstoppable," said Rimbaud. "That's kind of why we're here in geosynchronous orbit with you guys."

Gonzalez felt the words "listen, asshole" rising to his lips, and bit them back. He had to be civil. He spoke slowly. With the white man, especially those bastard sons of the Romanies, any lie was justified.

"How do you suggest we stop him?"

Rimbaud smiled. "I was kind of hoping it wouldn't come to this, but, see, the Army had it figured out that the only way to safely ensure our friend Mr Voorhees was out of the picture, well, that involves the fairly drastic measure..."

"Yes? Drastic measure of..."

"Of getting him up here onto the ship and maneuvering him into the drive kernel. That is, past the base of the stargate. Of course, that would be highly experimental and very dangerous. I'm not sure we're ready to explain to headquarters, should anything happen to the ship."

"The ship? Sir, Jason has turned Moon Base into his own personal abattoir! The Army command has been eliminated. Moon Camp is littered with body parts... You're our only hope!"

"Roger that. Stand by for docking."

JJ cut off the transmission.

"Can you believe that asshole? That man has been on the Uranian crank..."

"Probably," said Amanda like an automatic salute. But let's not stand here and give him a tox screen, okay? Any minute now, our big friend is going to turn up with his machete and turn us into hors d'oeuvres."

"Do you know the docking protocol?"

"No, but I think Pink does. Pinkie?"

"Yes, dear," said Pink.

"You heard?"

"Yes dear, I know the docking protocol. Who doesn't?"

"Pink, if you weren't an android I could swear you were fucking with us."

"That would be a safe bet," Pink answered, applying lip-gloss with a handheld mirror.

"Don't worry, I'll interface with Major Tom and start the docking sequence."

"Hello? What the fuck? I'm not getting any signal."

JJ's head jerked around.

"What are you talking about? Here, give me that thing."

"But sir, you're not wired like a droid."

"Very well. Just plug yourself in and see what's up?"

"As I said sir, I'm not getting a signal. Hold on. Wait.

"Yes, there's a bit of static on the line; sounds like someone pushing a broom up and down the carpeting in an old motel room."

"Could you spare me the metaphor, darling?"

Pinkie saluted. Was she subtly mocking him with that gesture? JJ wasn't sure. But it was making him highly nervous. He felt the fear coming on like a Plutonian gas storm.

"Yes, yes. I'll open up the channel." She put it on the speakers.

"People of Earth, this is your captain," said Major Tom.

JJ groaned. "This is very much not a good sign."

"Listen, you don't have to get all hostile," said the major, curling and flexing his claws like a heavy metal size queen.

"Get me ground control," said the major vigorously. Pinkie looked pleadingly at JJ. He shrugged his shoulders. "Hey, lady, it's your move."

"Okay," said Pink, her lips whispering softly into the 'com.

"Major Tom to Ground Control."

She turned to JJ. "Your move."

JJ snapped on a mic. "Check, check, one, two, this is Ground Control to Major Tom. Reading you loud and clear."

"That's not bloody right, man!" responded the major. "I'm insulted."

"Just jesting with you man," said JJ with a smile. "Just fooling. Take it easy okay?"

"Fiddlesticks on your vain performance, earthlings," said the major.

"Let's synchronize this stargate business!"

\*\*\*

Jason stopped just past the event horizon, the place where the basin spilled into inky nothing. His outlined shape streaked, phosphorescent silver bubbles popping in the semidarkness. *Suspiria's* Black Queen, born again through her only misbegotten son.

Within the shape writhed a wilderness of plasma blobs: the last signals of semiotic death. Jason Voorhees was losing his edge.

Edges.

His boundaries snapped back and forth in biological space. A glitch in virtuality. Or so it would appear. At some point he broke into two different monster planes, canted slightly off register to one another, like an ancient Prevac four color comics separation.

Then Jason Voorhees stepped away from Überjason

Conceptually speaking, only Pink could handle this turn of events. She had absorbed so many personalities by this point that she actually finally understood the scriptural story of the Gabardine swine as a literal, walking-around fact.

She was Legion. And so was Jason. Whatever Jason Voorhees was—had been, would become—lurked around the edges of the drive kernel, peeling off layers like some fucked-up onion.

They stood facing one another, gunmen in an old Spaghetti Western.

On the one side of the gallery: Jason Voorhees, that sod of the earth who wore a burlap bag with eyeholes cut into it, to hide his hideous visage. To mask his ugly yawp. To replace the bag with a hockey mask, and become an icon. Clasico.

The gunslinger stood his ground.

At the other end, the Überjason, a product of bad science and scandalously inappropriate technology, mirrored his ancestor's movements. The Ace of Spades. Remember, it's the only card you need.

In quantum terms, the two were identical, the wave and particle aspects of an electron momentarily pasted on the same page.

Would they even recognize one other? Both tilted their heads in a quizzical, Jasonesque motion. (Fill yer hand, pilgrim.)

Neither moved forward. The Überjason raised his machete in the air as if to strike. Jason did likewise. The air between them: a ghost fog, a thick glowing yellow substance flickered through with lightning streaks.

Things were born and dying there, eldritch spawn bred from the shadow of a moment. Some arcane process whispered dialog. Closed: two pieces of one soul.

Then, suddenly, his machete reaping the air, the Überjason rushed forward into the fog. Jason did likewise.

For a moment they were lost together, like some spooky ballet of the blind. Strange things were happening in that murk. Uncanny things. Not meant to be things

Jason Voorhees-type things.

For a moment, the entire original campground from the first *Friday the 13th* movie rose full-bore into the quantum wasteland. The throne of Pandemonium, raised in hell. Lucifer himself might have approved.

The pier upon which Jason had fought Freddy Kreuger, the clawfingered Dark Knight of the Chaos Gods; this was their new battlefield. The scene of a final, desperate standoff between machine and man. Hardware and software.

More was at stake here than the future of Moon Camp. Much more.

Caught within the net of subliminal movements strung together between the two like a chain of beads, the universe performed a difficult calculus. Spinning the chamber. Making a choice. Or so it would appear.

Then again, the wave and particle aspects of an electron could never be tracked simultaneously. One, or the other, will appear in the final readout.

Then again, Jason Voorhees was clearly charging his upgraded twin, into the murk where the decision would be made. Spin, spin. Meat or metal? Upgrade or flesh?

The plasma storm concentrated. JJ, Amanda and Pink watched in eternal awe as the fog became a sheet of ice, shattered into a billion frozen crystals—a glass wall.

Shatter.

Jason and his machine mate slammed around the wall like VirchHock players on the Mandelbrot. Big Jason struck little Jason in the shoulder. The streak of sliced flesh streamed with tiny white worms. Maggots.

The blade flashed again. Opening Jason where his stomach might have been.

More maggots. A storm system blaze of the little buggers.

A Big Freeze simulcast of blade cuts, the machete crisscrossed micrometers of clothing still clinging to Jason's body: the industrial work shirt; the stained, blood-spattered black paints; the black boots, shiny with visceral slime. Walking puke.

A dangerous meeting of simple-minded organisms. A maggot mound that moved slowly, inexorably, towards big brother. His clothing cleaved, Jason's maggot-ridden corpse began to shake loose as he advanced, leaving little pools of white maggot protein smeared

across the basin's slick surface. Tiny curlicues; pallid incidental sculptures shaped by chaos.

JJ felt his last meal begin to rise. He looked over at Amanda. Amanda let go of his hand and backed away, shaking her head.

"Oh no you don't," she said. JJ let go.

His vomit rained down on the floor in Technicolor hues. This was worse than any Yage trip, worse than any wrong turn in virtual downtown. Quantum reality was duking it out with the artificial paradise squad. And the quanti were winning.

"Oh, gross," he muttered. "I got it on my hair!" His dreads dripped with the vomit. Amanda took another step back. Big Jason looked at them. They froze.

Now he was walking toward them. As he moved, big Jason absorbed his maggot-laden twin. The wall shattered. The maggots resolved into nano ants, a silver stream of them, pouring over Jason's body. Jason was expanding in sophistication, in intelligence, cunning.

Ultimate menace.

A walking dark star. A dead world come to life. A thing of evil, more potent than any yet known. Badder than Satan. More merciless than Jehovah. Able to spawn multiple franchises with a single kill.

Silent. Unstoppable. And very, very dead.

What was his secret? How did he reform himself so freely? What were his powers? Did they come from God, Satan, Mr Bean, or possibly the old *Muppet Show*?

Jason himself is incurious.

If you were an unstoppable undead serial killer with limitless potential for the old death, would you be curious who made you? Or would you just lift the old machete, clench it in your bloody fist and say, "It's slaying time"?

So this is what happens to Jason at the present time: He is pocked. Poked. Peppered with tiny emblems, secret signs, crytoglyphic typography. Jason was not just expanding in strength, in might of brain and heft of brawn: he was blowing up. Exploding. Melting down to the size of a very small mouse. Then Jason was a blip on the final radar. And over.

Time for another game of the VirchHock, folks. That will be 1,000 credits. Please pay up front. And thank you for your cooperation with the government of the New American Republic. Where good people send better people to die in strange lands over cruel and hateful ideologies shared only by the tiniest minority among the good people.

The little enclave known as the Teknopriesthood.

Fade to black.

\*\*\*

Gonzalez leaned against the bulkhead, lost in thought. Something told him that it was too early to celebrate. Yes, they'd sent the bodily form of Jason Voorhees roaring into the bowels of a black hole—he, and the entire apparatus, had disappeared, presumably en route to that designation.

Even if he did emerge, it wouldn't be within their lifetimes, or the lifetimes of their great-great-grandchildren; and if it did, it would be hideously mangled, deformed beyond recognition, fused with space debris; a piteous mass of moving metal.

In about a hundred million years.

That was the trajectory of the form they'd sent away.

But the essence of Jason, his molecular code, his DNA, everything that the bodily form had experienced—that germ lurked somewhere in cyberspace, in artificial reality, in nanospace, in the fiberoptics of the moonbase, in its living skin. Controlled now by the debauched and deranged AI they'd once called Major Tom.

What if—and this was almost too horrible, too sickening to contemplate, but he had to think it—what if Jason was still out there? Not that thing in the exoskeleton, but in the walls, the ceiling vents, the very atmosphere of the biodome?

Brooding. Waiting for a green signal.

"Credits for your cogito," asked Pink with a sweet yet vacant smile. She was channeling the spirit of 21st Century necroporn icon, Paris Hilton.

"Nothing, I was only thinking..."

"Why don't we do something to rest that brain of yours," said Pink seductively. JJ looked across at Amanda, who smiled, sharing the same thought.

Sweet, thought JJ, two wired humans and a superintelligent sexbot. Pink closed her fingers on JJ's thigh and trailed downwards as Amanda closed in to kiss him wetly on the mouth; wetly, with just a trace of tongue.

The lights sputtered: rain on hot chrome.

"What was that?" JJ yelped, startled.

"Pay no attention, dear," said Pink. JJ hadn't had girls this hot in about a hundred million years.

Earth II time, that is.

"It's the powergrid reformatting itself. It's taken a lot of wear and tear, you know. Meanwhile, we'll have to entertain ourselves the best way we know. Like our ancestors did."

Of course, JJ suppressed the thought that Pink's ancestors weren't real people. Then again, he was beginning to wonder what qualified one as a real person, anyway. In any event, his body was singing, an electric choir summoned from soft, mingled caresses.

Why should he fight it? Why think? Why wonder? Why ask why? Try the prison industrial complex.

The lights swam on again. In that brief instant, JJ saw the walls transformed, morphed to a slick, hard white, puckered with hundreds and hundreds of tiny holes.

As though a fractal swarm of frenetic, iron-jawed termites had descended in the dark. Pencil-thin streams of intense light shot through the holes, making a patterned grid across their bodies.

At regular intervals, dark sockets erupted from the white surface, through which glowered hundreds of pairs of fiery red eyes. An infinite mask for the darkest god in the new creation. The Prevac myth had been right after all. There was a man in the moon. And his name was Death.

JJ lay down on the floor as Pink eased off his clothes. No point in telling them what he'd seen—they had all fought the good fight; they deserved to celebrate winning the battle, even if they had lost the war.

He closed his eyes, emptied his mind and prepared for the end of the world. At least he would be with friends.

\*\*\*

Beyond the immaculately molded galleries of the biosphere, the Moon is cold. Like the man said, She is a harsh mistress. Nothing moves there. Except for the ever-blinking machinery. The eye loving machinery.

Leaves of hacked grass, flash-frozen and born again as particulate matter. Robot spycams crawl dunes of that white particulate matter, leaving tiny impressions in the sand. Fractal relays, whisps, trances and tails of icestorms dance upon the surface.

At times, from a certain distance, a pattern spiraled out, a design scrawled by chaotic fingers, recalibrated and formatted for your home viewing pleasure.

The contents of the pattern changed, but the message was the same:

Stay.

The fuck.

Away.

Beyond the molded galleries of the biosphere, the Moon is cold. She spares no one, not even herself. Scourges her flesh with whiplash bursts of icy sand. Flagellates her body with ammonia-heavy weather systems.

And always comes back, dripping, for just one more.

From behind a dunerise, a long shadow emerges. It leaks out over the sand like the ripped claws of some rough beast.

Following the shadow, a stain on time, a blocky figure emerges. An immortal spawn of the chaos gods. A one-man death machine. As though the scraps of stray engines left to die on the Moon like so many bugs have assembled themselves. Merged into a composite figure. Aligned against sinister grids. Bedazzled. Bewitched. Defiled.

Something hardy enough to resist the freezing winds. Something so brutal, hard and masterful that it doesn't need shelter from the storm. Something like the storm itself.

Like him.  
Like Jason Voorhees.

\*\*\*

But how is this happening? And why? Especially so late in the text?

Okay. Recall how, in the first chapter of this saga, a spaceship called *Maldoror* swallowed Jason's only child? And remember how the *Maldoror* returned?

This is what happened.

If it sounds weird, it's because it takes place in quantum reality. The mathematics that define quantum reality are called nonlinear equations. That is, the effects of one equation may not directly affect the outcome of another equation. Or so it would appear.

Because besides space there is time.

According to Einstein, this is the same thing.

A hyperspace port, or stargate, or spategate, generally considered an invention of lazy science fiction authors on a deadline, is actually deducible through the higher mathematics. Like other laws of nature that we can't actually see in action, but can predict probable outcomes of.

Anyway.

Travel through a hyperspace port is facilitated by the use of a wormhole. A wormhole arises when a star collapses into itself, forming what is popularly known as a black hole.

So this is what happened.

Much like Alice, London Jefferson went down the wormhole, bumping Jason out. See, Jason was the more recent arrival. London had dibs. And Jason was back in Moon City. Just outside the outskirts of, actually, but pretty goddamn close.

Extremely fucking close.

# SIXTEEN

Darcy Bricollet was about to get some.

He could feel it. Worked up into that. Curled up like a thousand reps with some sweet yet painful instrument of self-actualization.

Into the game. The chase. The catch and release. The relay of torsion and dressage that followed. The whaling away with blue canes. The unusual variations on the age-old practice of mating.

He'd been reading a book lately, a kind of fractal encyclopedia. Words spilled out, followed by linkages, designs, stories of Sinbad the Sailor. It didn't look like the menu to Moon Burger, let's put it that way.

When a giant walked by. A giant with a metal face.

Who was this? Some joker from a traveling carnival planet? A freaky hybrid? Jason Voorhees?

No. It couldn't be.

Jason pushed his fist through Darcy's face, claimed his brain, then looked up. The diners scattered like guilty peasants after a government overthrow. But Jason was on top of them. He was all over that. Forks flew through corneas with a nasty sound, cherry tomatoes exploding under the top back molar. Gourmands flailed beneath the shredded remains of recently unionized toaster ovens.

Jaded hookers ran screaming, burning iron pokers stuck through their backs. Electrified waiters pummeled the air. Jason threw the waiters in a pile. Tossed a bottle of cognac on that pile. Lit a match to it. The waiters' bodies exploded in fire. Jason sniffed the air, quizzically.

It was good. Like the mesquite bricollettes back at camp. Before the hurt began. Before they killed Mommy. Silent sulk. Rage of the black resin. Eruption of the fractal bug jitters. Electric circuits shatter Jason's body, trailing full spectrum flare-guns.

Jason's heart is getting big. Pumping fat wads of the black resin. His heart is getting mad. So mad it could explode. Because they were everywhere. Everywhere he looked. The static. The meat.

The ones his mommy warned him about. The ones that looked like strangers. That punished him and pushed him aside. That let him drown. He would never forget that the gurgle gurgle gurgle and then the letting go and the discovery, the rediscovery, of his body. Still alive. Only changed. Not like before.

Kill for me. Kill for mommy.

They were interchanging faces, forcibly connecting and unconnecting, flesh from flesh, particle from particle, shreds of optic nerve strung out on thin, shivering, hypnotic lines.

Kill for me. For mommy.

Kill forever.

They can never kill you.

He was still dead. Again. And he kept coming. Again. Because he felt the limit. They were the limit. They were the walls. The walls of flesh. The walls that had to be torn. Ripped. Rendered. Wrung piece from piece.

Jason was the limit.

Mr Fuck.

\*\*\*

Swish, swoosh and tinkle of cocktail glasses. Digital rewind. Courtesies are summarily exchanged among sinister tuxedoed guests. A well-deserved, long overdue respite from work. An opportunity to show off, to rinse off limbs caked with gook, to rise like splendid swans folded in postindustrial pockets.

To demonstrate that they are still women. To argue that they are still men. To avoid going home alone tonight, again.

The ancillary work crew attached to Moon Base inhabited their own miniature town. Unlike the biosphere in design, it resembled more the endless gray buildings of the Prevac Cold War, the grim hives utilized for sleeping, bathing and eating, and nothing more. Where sex was a luxury most could not afford.

Except that, unlike those buildings, the row upon row of badly insulated boxes carrying the drift of raw onions from unit to unit, Moon Town only looked hard on the outside. Like a ghost town with

only one spectral, flickering gas station; blue flash of exploded octane.

Inside, at least for tonight, was a whole different story. There was entertainment.

Not just any entertainment, either. Some of the finest talents, the choicest artistes from Planet Vegas, had come to ply their trade. To celebrate the final steps of the biodome's construction.

After nine Earth II years, the Moon colony was ready to open its doors in earnest. The banners flew everywhere. Thanking the workers for the nice jobs they'd done. Thank you, nice workers, for the nice jobs you've done. Nice. Let's say that word. Nice. Again. Feels good on your teeth, doesn't it?

Congratulating them for the struggles they'd overcome, the hardships faced, the sheer overwhelming endurance necessary to bring the project off. Their willingness to forego union negotiations until after the grand opening.

John Robertson sat at the direct fusion piano in the impromptu ballroom, fashioned out of gaffer's tape, smoke, mirrors and Utility Fog. From where the audience sat, Robertson looked like a man floating on his own private cloud. On his very own Moon.

Robertson, however, could not see the crowd. Robertson was blind; had always been blind. Unlucky enough to have been born during one of the "quiet revolutions" that routinely brought life on Earth II to a screeching halt.

A screeching, screaming halt. Fast as a cartoon shark. Faster than an anime outbreak in the Warner Brothers/Loony Tunes back lot.

As politicians reassessed their priorities and gamers covertly renewed expired licenses, Robertson never received proper medical treatment for his condition. He languished, cursing his luck. As a result, he'd grown to manhood with a song in his heart and a chip on his shoulder.

A microchip, actually, embedded in his clavicle bone. Of his bones were coral made. And those are pearls that were his eyeteeth.

"How are you all doing tonight?" he asked from the cloud. Scattered applause. Whoops. Hollers. Yells. "Play us something we can dance to," yelled one inebriate, anxious to get his drink on.

"I know just the thing," Robertson breathed into the microphone. Yeah, he was good. Knew it too. Almost too fucking good. His husky voice and NeoIrish good looks always took him further than he might have gone on his own.

And the blindness didn't hurt either. Sometimes he suspected that it actually improved his luck with the other sex. They didn't get so freaked out, so scared.

Not as scared as they should be.

Long, tapered fingers tickle the ivories. "This song really brings me back," Robertson said. "All the way to the Microsoft Quarantine. You remember that?"

They remembered all right, just didn't want to be reminded.

"Don't bum us out, boss," yelled a heckler, a long throated, silk-shirted young black man fresh from the Mujahadeen cluster. He'd tired of the NeoArabian rough trade and wanted nothing more than early retirement, cheap whores, and plenty of the old dark sauce. Some of that *Harold and Kumar* shit.

"You know we don't like those sad songs."

"Oh, this isn't sad. It's a little melancholy. But it's not sad."

Robertson began to play the first few bars of "Death Moon." Ah. Sweet. That was some of the necro. And more where that came from.

He shifted his spine on the piano bench, smiling like a dazed, NeoIrish Ray Charles. A gentleman. And a dog among dogs. A favorite during the last debauched days of the Microsoft Quarantine, in which entire cities had been declared trade-free zones while festering like open sores, "Death Moon" took from the Cole Porter source and added a special sauce.

It was hip. It was fly. It was where they were this Saturday night.

"Peel back the windows," Robertson sang. "Tear down the walls. Open your heart to that crazy Death Moon." His suit glowed with the fractal backscatter of a million show tunes. Couples glazed on each other's eyes with subliminal frosting. Magic.

The rhythm was a slow waltz subtly infused with African polyrhythms. Spectral scatter off the white radiance. On the swooping vapor holoscreen gathering behind Robertson's head, slow drops gathered a water ballet.

Right in time to the music. Drop a dime on that.

Beat.

Splash.

Jason Voorhees approached the gates of Moon City. Rude graffiti of newly-crusted blood. Automatic sewing needles skitter through lymph.

The same angry eyes. The same strong, handsome jaw structure. More than preserved. More than enhanced. Ripped. Fueled.

And ready for extreme death.

No, not extreme death. Motherfucking icecold death!

And you could push that in your asshole and smoke it up your pipe!

\*\*\*

Jason punched through the airlock. The airlock gave with just the faintest tinge of defeat, like a balding Earth bitch who prefers to go quietly, leaking a millennium-wide trail of the foul yellow liquid.

Beyond the airlock lay stairs. And more stairs. Stairs that went up. Stairs that went down. Stairs leading to other stairs. More stairs than seemed feasible or reasonable, really, considering the access issues they posed.

At the top of Stairline B17, music was playing. Jazz cocktail for prepared fusion piano. John Robertson, singing his heart out for all the ladies.

Hello ladies.

And all the men, keeping one eye out for the ladies and another eye out for the smooth piano man. Just because he was blind didn't mean he wasn't trouble.

Curved dome awash with stellar light. White radiance of eternity. Funeral contagion chords of George Crumb. Peace and love hacked to bits behind overwhelming forces. Shatter. Break. Immanence of the digital text.

At first, all Robertson picked up on was the commotion. Couples had stopped moving, threads unwound from other threads, polymers took rest breaks.

Then glasses began to fall.

He could hear each microtinkle loudly, painfully, tympanic membranes vibrating like sepulchral seashells, pitched at five times the volume threshold an ordinary human sustains without—wince!—permanent damage. But that was how Robertson saw through the chip on his shoulder. Through the pearly gateway, and beyond.

To? Smells of wet, ripe carnage. Serving trays heavy with champagne offloaded, used as weapons. Clack and crackle of things breaking. The hiss of atmosphere sealant. Like a giant popping the cork back on some big fucking champagne bottle. This was how he saw through the swirls of sound, the vaulting chaos, as he stood up, closed the fusion piano, and waited for a signal.

"Sparky," he said, summoning the Kay Nine unit.

The artificial dog rolled itself up at Robertson's feet.

"Sparky, what's going on?"

Sparky the Kay Nine unit spoke in a rapid gibberish composed of scraps of NeoSenegalese and the latest additions to the Universal Binary Code. He was the best friend Robertson had ever had. And he wasn't even human. Wasn't even animal. Was, in fact, a perfectly functioning machine. A "biofriendly", they were callin' 'em.

"What do you say, boy? Boy?"

Robertson heard the signal fading out, getting weaker and weaker. A high-pitched hum vaulted the sound spectrum in his left ear. He winced. That was enough to give him blinding headaches most days, when the thing went off. When it malfunctioned. Leaving him stranded. Alone. Feeling pretty fucking useless.

As death carved a swathe through the diners, on a straight path to the performing artist, Robertson tickled the keys one last time. His head came off with one sleek blow from Jason's machete.

The head hit the piano top, rolled over, slid past a cluster of fruit shaped in memory of Hieronymous Bosch, and finally smacked against a leg from the nearest table.

It was still grinning. His last thought had been a happy one. A bit clichéd, but happy nonetheless.

"What a terrible thing it is," thought Robertson, "to lose one's head."

Jason looked up. The partiers faced him from behind an impromptu barricade, cobbled from chairs, tables, chandeliers, odd bits of broken glass, fractal curls of the Utility Fog and unknown substances that later defied the most sophisticated analysis known to civilized man. "Au-dessus des epaules, la plage."

Whatever firepower they could summon, these partiers summoned.

They weren't military ops, were not trained in special weaponry or the cryptic art of the bone jigsaw. They were just regular guys, ordinary women and men: off-Earth stock loaders. Utility Fog engineers.

Random homosexuals looking for interplanetary rough trade (one or two). Workers from the dust planet of Syrinx (five, actually). Aged social workers there to pour away the last miserable moments of their miserable lives behind tall glasses of the Blue Death (one—be patient).

All they wanted was a break. A little ray of hope. Some cool jazz on the moon at the start of the six month night. Surely that wasn't too much to ask.

Jason Voorhees did not have an opinion. He did have:

A machete.

A brand-new upgrade.

And millennia of built-up rage.

Primed for detonation.

Waiting.

Seeking.

The final floorshow.